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Politics of Representations: *Snow Man* and *Bait* by David Albahari

Damjana Mraovic
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Damjana Mraovic entitled "Politics of Representations: *Snow Man* and *Bait* by David Albahari." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Amy Elias, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Allen Dunn, Lisi M. Schoenbach

Accepted for the Council:
Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Anne Mayhew
Vice Chancellor and
Dean of Graduate Studies

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POLITICS OF REPRESENTATIONS: *SNOW MAN* AND *BAIT* BY DAVID ALBAHARI

A Thesis
Presented for the
Masters of Arts
Degree
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Damjana Mraović
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Abstract

The thesis analyzes stereotypes about the Balkans in two novels, *Snow Man* (1995) and *Bait* (1996), by contemporary Serbian writer David Albahari (b. 1948), and how these assumptions, mostly imposed by the West and its tradition of reading the East/the Balkans, are internalized or problematized in these works. This thesis also includes a new, original interview with Albahari conducted by the thesis author. The thesis addresses a change in Albahari's poetics from metafiction typical for the 1970s and 1980s, to epic forms, which encapsulate the totality of historical experience, in the 1990s. Ultimately, the thesis points out a paradox in Albahari's works. Although he and his characters adamantly claim that they want to escape from history and the limitations it imposes on an individual, they are defined by a specific historical context (war) and cultural context (the Balkans). The novels suggest that it is not only impossible to overcome a dominant negative discourse about the Balkans, but also that identity is always defined by a historical and cultural context of which an individual is a part. In addition, Snow Man is based on visual metaphors while Bait is based on aual Albahari claims that intercultural understanding is unattainable because it is rooted in stereotypes, although, paradoxically, he allows a possibility that stereotypes represent a provisional identity form.

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Introduction

David Albahari (b. 1949) is a Serbian writer who has lived more than 10 years in exile in Canada. He went into exile because the former Yugoslavia was torn apart by war. Albahari left the country in 1993, and from 1995 to 1997 he wrote three books which are known as his "Canadian circle," *Snow Man*, 1995; *Bait*, 1996; *Mrak* (*Darkness*), 1997. The novels introduced a major change into his prose: dominant metafiction from the 1970s and 1980s was transformed into postmodern historical fiction. Displaced and far away from the country he left, Albahari wrote novels in which he examined impacts of history on personal identities and argued against the negative, although prevalent, discourse about the Balkans. The first and the last books of the cycle, *Snow Man* and *Bait*, are the most significant. *Snow Man* represents an abrupt change in Albahari's prose and introduces stereotypes to which Albahari almost obsessively returns in all of his later novels; *Bait* is not only the most artistically acclaimed part of the cycle, but it also introduces Albahari's most nuanced argument about former-Yugoslav history and socially imposed discourses.

This thesis analyzes stereotypes about the Balkans in these two novels and examines how these assumptions, mostly imposed by the West and its tradition of reading the East/the Balkans, are internalized or problematized in these works. Since the novels are situated in the mid-1990s, the time when the ethnic clashes in the former Yugoslavia took place (1991-1995), they can also be considered a deft critique of Yugoslav political and historical events.

Albahari's novels represent Western and Balkan stereotypes about the Balkans that are either adopted or, once recognized, modified in his prose. His absence from the

country enabled him to focus on stereotypes, and in the novels he activates stereotypes through binary oppositions in both the Balkan and Western cultures: the primitive Balkans misunderstand the New World, while at the same time the pragmatic and capitalistic New World is not able to see through Balkan Otherness.

Albahari's novels from the 1990s introduced a new theme into his work; before this decade, he was almost exclusively concerned with the in/ability of communication in (post)modern society and language itself. His early prose was experimental and anti-realistic. It was fragmented and often autopoetical, closer to poetry than to epic narration. However, influenced by the social changes and ethnic clashes in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s, his prose became a response to history and an attempt to recapitulate reality within the epic form; his experimental prose turned into historical realism. His identity, which was once expressed in and through language experiments, language was developed into an identity of the historical moment—and the historical moment was manifested as a stereotypical conflict between Western/Eastern experience about the region.

Although in Albahari's earlier works language was the central organizer of total human experience—which enabled him to conclude that "all stories have already been told and nothing is left." In the new reality language itself became inadequate for an understanding of the catastrophic reality by which the author was possessed. Albahari's linguistic structures, as it is suggested by the novels generally known as "the Canadian cycle," were justified as long as the author had complete control over his fictional world, when reality and art were distinctly separated because the historical context did not offer plots that could be more persuasive than those invented. Nevertheless, when history

created a situation that demanded that a person take a side and act in the epoch, the impartial poetical/theoretical approach collapsed because Albahari could not analyze or respond to questions provoked by reality (*Why do people get killed? What is the purpose of the war?*). Thus, a new system needed to be created, and Albahari turned to grandiose thematic ideas (history, politics, nation, ethnicity, economy) and stereotypes.

Therefore, this thesis addresses two central problems: a switch in Albahari's fiction from metafiction to historical narratives, and the theme of identity confusion caused by historical circumstances. I argue that Albahari's switch to historical narration and stereotypes can be explained by the insufficiency of his linguistic postmodernism and highly poetical metafiction in the changed historical conditions. On the other hand, his focus on stereotypes is rooted in an attempt to renounce the simplified and negative, although dominant, discourse about the Balkans that is imposed by the West. As the analysis shows, instead of renouncing those clichés, Albahari's prose introduces a question by which, it seems, even he is baffled: Is it possible to participate in a communication about stereotypes without perpetuating their already conventional negative meanings?

This thesis addresses these problems in three chapters, beginning with an overview of former Yugoslav history. The first chapter analyzes *Snow Man*, Albahari's first novel written in exile. It is significantly different in concept from *Bait*, which is analyzed in the second chapter. Finally, an interview with Albahari reveals his views about language, history, the change in his poetics, and his position as a writer in exile. The interview not only provides a deeper insight into some of the most important elements in Albahari's fiction (literary influences, his perception of the relationship

between history and fiction, his use of language), but also gives voice to the author and many of his concerns. In that sense, the academic scrutiny of the thesis is enlivened by the actual author's voice. As a Serbian writer, Albahari is little known to American readers, and thus this thesis attempts to introduce his work and his voice to this new audience.

In *Snow Man*, the narrator—an academic and writer who comes to a Canadian university town to give a few lectures— is appalled equally by the current events in his home country and by the Western misunderstanding and lack of interest in them, as well as by stereotypical representations about the war and the Balkan. In shock that Western intellectuals can be either completely biased about or utterly disinterested in the events that do cause human suffering, his realism gradually changes into nihilism. He dies in a snowstorm, symbolically, near a highway. In this novel, Albahari recognizes the power of stereotypes, suggests their negative authority, and tries to undermine them by introducing the concrete counter-reality of maps. I call his argument *visual*, in that it counters the ambiguity of language. Albahari's narrator is silenced by history and his new cultural background, and thus sees non-linguistic, visual maps as a concrete argument against the Western image of the Balkans. Since maps indicate that the Balkan history is as the same as any other country's history (marked by wars over territories), the narrator concludes not only that the Yugoslav people speak the general historical language but also that they have a right to be called civilized because wars were one of the most important elements in the development of Western civilization.

Unlike *Snow Man*, which identifies stereotypes and a narrator's disorientation in new historical circumstances, *Bait* is a discussion of the disintegration of the former

Yugoslavia. Three characters (mother, narrator, and Canadian writer, Donald) voice certain stereotypes about the country, while the character Donald reveals his own stereotypes not only about the Balkans, but Europe as well. Thinking about the Balkans is not only problematized through the points of view of two different *insiders* (mother, narrator), but also is shaped and opposed by an *outsider's* (Donald's) perception. Albahari implies that understanding between different cultures is unattainable because it is grounded in stereotypical, imposed images: "I will always be a European, as he will be always be a North American, and about this nothing can be changed; we will always remain different as night and day" (Albahari 62). However, Albahari finds in stereotypes a provisional identity; although not positive or desired as a final representation, a stereotyped identity grants one some measure of recognition to dominant cultures. Thus, Albahari activates a problem of linguistic limitations that this thesis finds paradoxical. Since his narrator moves to a country without mastering its language, his linguistic abilities are not sufficient for basic communication or for understanding the new social context. Moreover, the new language makes it impossible for the narrator to reinvent his identity because his linguistic ineptitude prevents any possibility of *re*identification. This situation leads to a double collapse of language: the narrator's native language cannot be a means of communication in Canada, while the foreign language allows the narrator neither to express himself nor to gain a desired, new identity.

Until now, Albahari's novels have been examined only in shorter critical texts, such as essays and critical reviews, the thesis contributes to a deeper analysis of Albahari's work. The essays about Albahari have been published in his home country, Serbia, and the US, Canada, Germany, as well as in France, where his books are well

received and he is recognized primarily as an "exiled author." Under the pressure of the dictator Slobodan Milosevic's regime in Serbia, Albahari claimed that he needed to leave the country because he felt uncomfortable as a Jew. Scholarly reviews in North America and Western Europe emphasize the seemingly ambiguous fact that he is highly regarded in Serbia, although he had to "flee" the country. Also, he is often wrongly described as a Central European author. Often, the characteristics of his prose and the historical moment in which he writes are acknowledged without establishing any deeper relationship between them. Similarly, Albahari's novels in Serbia are not the object of a profound critical attention; there are many reviews and shorter essays about his novels, but not a book-length study.

The reviewers are focused on the change in Albahari's poetics (ahistoricism turned into realism) and his displacement (see Mihajlo Pantić), but there are rarely attempts to analyze his novels in the light of that change (see Mraović). The scholars often analyze main themes in Albahari's work: death and existential angst, and his obsession with linguistic limitations (Aleksandar Jerkov, Dejan Ilić, Predrag Brebanović).[1] Also, it is interesting that scholars who highly regarded his postmodern prose written in the 1970s and 1980s, seeing in it a typical change from late 1960s (social) realism to postmodern fiction in the following decades, do not write about his more recent novels (e.g. Aleksandar Jerkov). As of April 2006, there is also a Serbian web-site called *David Albahari*, with an address that indicates his home town Zemun, but although there is not any suggestion that the web-site is under construction, it is not

[1] Dejan Ilić."Ko priča priču." *Reč* 7-8 (1996) http://host.sezampro.yu/rec/9607/rec96075.htmč Predrag Brebanović. "Od entropije ka paranoji." *Reč* 7-8 (1996) http://host.sezampro.yu/rec/9607/rec96075.htmč.

finished and provides only Albahari's short biography, Pantić's article about *Snow Man*, (see Pantić's collection) and one short story from the collection "Opis smrti" (under Stories and Comments). Although there is not any information about the latest web-site's update, it can be concluded that new information has not been added for years; the web-sites lists *Gec i Majer* (1998) as the latest Albahari book. Albahari is regarded as one of the best and most interesting Serbian contemporary authors and yet there is not a longer or systematic scholarly work about his books. Therefore, this thesis tries to bridge that gap and introduce Albahari's works to both American and Serbian academia.

In the United States and Canada, Albahari's books are presented usually through short reviews and interviews, which emphasize his position of exiled author (Bzron Evans, Anderson Tepper). Also, it seems that western scholars are more interested in his novel *Gotz and Meyer* (which is not analyzed here) because its main subject, the Holocaust, is historical and unlike the Balkan's war, widely documented—the Holocaust. While the lack of scholarly monographs about Albahari's books in the US can be attributed to the slow translation of his oeuvre and relative lack of interest by US readers in international literature, the lack of critical attention in Serbia can be ascribed to the country's political situation.

This thesis, hence, provides the first monograph-length literary analysis of Albahari's two "Canadian novels" and represents him as a writer important to critical discourse. Since the thesis is based on an analysis of Balkan/Western stereotypes, and includes a wider political and cultural context both in Serbia and the West, it also bridges a gap between the two academic cultures. The thesis introduces Albahari to American academia and deepens a critical conversation about his work, not as a minority writer, but

as an author of international acclaim whose novels are both greatly influenced by history and support a new premise about the Balkans as a distinctive cultural and political space. Furthermore, this thesis attempts to draw attention to an oppressively oversimplified discourse about the Balkans that continues to dominate Western discussions of that region's history. Although the thesis cannot change those stereotypes, it contributes a reconsideration, and redefinition, of the Balkan negative Other.

Chapter I

Yugoslavia, the Balkans, Identities, and Albahari: A Short Overview

In 1992, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia disintegrated.[2] The country was formed after the Second World War and consisted of six autonomous republics (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia); it had five official languages (Serbo-Croatian, Croato-Serbian, Slovenian, Macedonian, and Croatian) and approximately twenty ethnic groups; it was governed by Josip Broz Tito (1892-1980), who was the leader of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, and thus the leader of the country.[3] The semi-official motto described Yugoslavia as the country of "brotherhood and unity." Tito was elected as president in 1953, and twenty six years later proclaimed himself as the "president for life." When he died—an adored and highly controversial figure—only a year after that announcement, in 1980, it was not surprising that the country, which is now referred to as the former Yugoslavia, collapsed. The unexpected result was the 1991 fall of the country, and the war-generating requests of its republics to become independent states killed 150,000 people and forced millions either into exile or "internal refuge." Yugoslavia became the only European country in which

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[2] See: Misha Glenny. *The Fall of Yugoslavia: The Third Balkan War*. New York: Penguin Books, 1996; Thomas Robert. *The Politics of Serbia in the 1990s*. New York: Columbia UP, 1999; Sabrina Ramet. *Balkan Babel: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia from the Death of Tito to the Fall of Milosevic.* Oxford: Westview, 2002; *Burn this house : the making and unmaking of Yugoslavia*, ed. Jasminka Udovicki and James Ridgeway. Durham: Duke UP, 2000; Andrew Wachtel. *Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998; John B. Allcock. *Explaining Yugoslavia.* New York: Columbia UP, 2000.

[3] Yugoslavia used to be described as a country of seven neighbors, six republics, five languages, three religions, two alphabets and one party. However, that description was inaccurate because it does not include several languages and nations not accounted for, such as Roma and their language, or Muslims (today Bosniaks), who were recognized as a nation in 1971. Since the first letters of all of the countries formed an acronym, *brigama*, genitive of a noun *trouble* (*briga*), former Yugoslavs often remarked that they are *surrounded by troubles* (*okruženi brigama*). I clearly remember that in the third grade the whole class stood in front of the former Yugoslavia map and that my teacher, trying to find an easy way for her students to remember all of the neighborhood countries, said this joke about the "Yugoslav troubles."

the reign of communism ended in bloodshed. Today, not even the name of the former state exists; Serbia and Montenegro, the only republics that decided to adopt the historical heritage of the previous state and introduce themselves in 1992 as the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, in 2002 became a loose federation of Serbia and Montenegro. Montenegrin politicians have publicized that a referendum about Montenegro's independence will be held in April 2006. If Montenegrins vote for their sovereignty, the former Yugoslavia's disintegration will be complete.

However, the ex-Yugoslav peoples were facing a genuine crisis of identity in the 1990s. There was identity confusion. The collapse of the former Yugoslavia and the war erased the artificial, national identity that was based on Yugoslav communist exclusiveness (a *Western* country with a socialistic government) and restraint of ethnic identification (ethnic differences were praised only as an element of Yugoslav unity). After the war, there was not a country to identify with and, moreover, ethnic self-identification (Serb, Croatian, Bosnian) was hazardous, although encouraged by new governments. In addition, the former Yugoslavs were suddenly labeled "Balkans" while they viewed themselves as Europeans, economically, politically, and culturally superior to all the other Balkan countries. The situation caused bewilderment; one historically-induced identity was eradicated (Yugoslav) but there was reluctance to accept the other one which equated the former Yugoslavs with all of the other Balkan peoples and was primarily negative. It excluded the former Yugoslavs (now Serbs, Croats, Bosnians) from Europe and called them primitive barbarians. There were two radically different responses to the new circumstances: people either accepted the new imposed identity or carried their confusion into exile (literally and metaphorically). In the first case, former

Yugoslavs uncritically followed the new political agendas and found in the Balkan identity an additional excuse for their ethnic intolerance and aggressive politics (e.g. *if Balkan implies primitive, I'll show what primitive really means*). On the other hand, those who opposed the regimes were despised as Yugo-nostalgic, communist, Stalinist, partisan, and traitors. Many of them chose self-exile in the former Yugoslavia.[4] If they had a public *voice* (intellectuals, writers, scholars), they talked about their usurped identities, obsessively trying to rationalize their chaotic position: if for half of their lives they identified themselves with a country that no longer existed, what now was their true identity? They were also interested in questions such as these: Can an identity be reinvented? If it can, why does it need to be constructed as "Other" yet again in the forms of "Balkan," "Eastern European," "post/ex-communist"?

"Tito's Yugoslavia" was unique. Unlike other Eastern and Central European communist countries, it was not a member of the Warsaw Pact or NATO. In 1948, Tito said "a historical *No*" to Russia, and that defined the political and cultural course of the country for the next 50 years. In short, Tito declined to follow Joseph Stalin's instructions regarding politics in the Balkans (Russia claimed that Tito was moving too fast toward a unification with Bulgaria and Albania, and he was eager to "export revolution" to

[4] In 1991 in Croatia, there was a public hunt for "Witches from Rio," six female Zagreb intellectuals and writers who openly opposed the brutality of the new Croatian democracy and its nationalism. The "hunt" initiated an article with the same title, written by an extremely conservative linguist who not only minutely analyzed the mixed, non-Catholic and non-Croatian ethnic backgrounds of the women, but also claimed that they were "profiteers of communism and post-communism," that they were "a mob of arrogant middle-aged women who have serious problems with their own ethnic, ethic, human, intellectual and political identity," that the global feminist movement "died with them," and that they "rape Croatia" (Tagirov par. 4). Three of the women soon left the country and made relatively successful careers in the West (Dubravka Ugrešić, Slavenka Drakulić, Jasmina Kuzmanović), two of them were already scholars in foreign countries (Rada Iveković, Vesna Kesić), and only one stayed in Croatia (Jelena Lovrić). The linguist, Slaven Letica, is a prominent Croatian scholar.

Greece), and Stalin claimed that Yugoslavia had "taken the path of seceding from the united socialist front against imperialism, [had] taken the path of betraying the cause of international solidarity of the working people, and [had] taken up a position of nationalism" (Cominform par. 18). Consequently, Stalin expelled the Yugoslav Communist Party from Cominform, while Tito's resistance was seen as an example of Stalin's inability to control not only Tito but also other leaders of Eastern European communist countries. However, Yugoslavia was no longer under Russian influence; Tito developed his own version of communism. In 1961, he initiated the Non-Aligned Movement, an international organization of mostly Third World countries that did not want to identify themselves with the Warsaw or NATO block. Although the organization was, and still is, focused on national struggles for independence, eradication of poverty, economic development, and education, and opposed colonialism and imperialism, its influence and cohesion was minor. However, in the former Yugoslavia, the Non-Aligned Movement was a symbol of the state's recent (historical) independence.

Yugoslavia was a country of "soft communism," on the border between the East and the West, and, more importantly, the country which was considered eastern to the West and western to the East. Until the 1990s, a Yugoslav passport was one of the most valuable on the black market because Yugoslavs did not need visas for most of the world; Polish, Eastern Germans, and Czechs came to the Adriatic coast to spend 14 days of vacation with "permission" from their governments, shoes were exported to Russia and sold in exclusive stores in Moscow, and *Vegeta*, a mixture of spices, was exchanged for

other goods when former Yugoslavs visited Romania or Bulgaria.[5] On the other hand, Western scholars viewed the Yugoslav system of self-management (1950s) and of "associated labor," in which the participation in management and a share in profits of socially owned companies was based on the investment of labour (1970s), as a perfect alternative to capitalism. From the Western perspective, Yugoslavia was a paradise of hard-working, happy, and highly educated people. French feminists visited the country frequently, while seminars about Jacques Lacan and his school of psychoanalysis were broadcast on the national radio.[6] There were Praxis summer schools; Yugoslavia was the Eastern European theoretical center. Yugoslavs, themselves, liked American and European movies (Tito was specifically fond of Westerns and even asked Richard Burton to play him in one of the partisan Second World War sagas), American and European rock'n'roll and literature, chewing gum and jeans, regular summer and winter vacations and, seemingly, a society without class or ethnic differences. They were also very proud of their "impartial" geopolitical position. Unfortunately, everything changed in the 1990s.

Historians agree that there are two main reasons for the disintegration of Yugoslavia. First, Tito "was inclined to regard any form of national self-assertion as an inherent threat to the state. Instead of accommodating legitimate expressions of national identity, his preferred solution to the problem was to suppress it, or, worse still, to neutralize [one] nationalism by pitting another against it" (Glenny 574). Second, and

[5] The myth of the former Yugoslavia and its "soft" government persists. A few years ago I participated in a seminar in Budapest, Hungary about post-communism and post-colonialism, and my comments about communism were abruptly cut by a Polish colleague who angrily claimed that I didn't "have a clue" what communism was because we, the former Yugoslavs, weren't "under Russians." Also, my Italian friend who has Polish acquaintances claims that she is very careful not to mention linguistic similarities between Serbian/Croatian and Polish to her Polish friends.

[6] For instance, Slavoj Žižek, a prominent Slovenian philosopher, was an active participant in those seminars. His career can be traced back to the seminars in Belgrade, Serbia and Ljubljana, Slovenia.

consequently, after the fall of communism in Europe in 1989, the old political structures in Yugoslavia tried to reinvent themselves and stay in power. The three most influential politicians of the time, Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia, Franjo Tuđman in Croatia, and Alija Izetbegović in Bosnia and Herzegovina, found nationalism. Since all of them based their political agendas on suppressed ethnic identities and talked about establishing new ethnic and independent states, disagreement was inevitable. The war started, even though one of the most frequent foreign and domestic analytical comments was "Europe won't allow [a war]."[7] The comment implied, ironically, a faith in humanism (*there can't be war at the door of the 21st century*), trust in the European political establishment, and, somehow naively, the former Yugoslavs' confidence in their European, not Balkan, Othered background. Raised under Tito's communism and his victory over Russian communism, they could not identify themselves with other Eastern European, or Balkan, nations. They often categorized themselves as Europeans, without strict religious or ethnic denominations: "Before the war, Yugoslavs were different from 'them' [the Balkan people]; despite today's emphasis on civilizational divisions along Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim lines, the Yugoslavs had *in toto* rejected their belonging to the Balkans. The only exception had been the world scholarship where Balkan has had a legitimate place and is used as the name of institutes and journals" (Todorova 83).

The Balkan countries include Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, Macedonia (all former Yugoslav republics), Bulgaria, Romania,

[7] Misha Glenny claims that Western Europe and the United States failed to recognize the threat of the new self-proclaimed leaders because they were celebrating the fall of communism in 1989, and they were engaged in the Gulf War. The Yugoslav problems were "out of focus."

Albania, and Greece.[8] The term *Balkan* comes from the Balkan peninsula, named after a mountain chain, which refers to the territory surrounded by the Black and Adriatic seas on the East and West, and the Aegean, Ionian and Marmora seas on the South. By the beginning of the 20th century, Europe referred to the region as its Other and coined the term *balkanization*, which described not only the parceling of large and viable political units but also implied the tribal, the primitive, the barbarian. It emphasized that the Balkans' inhabitants did not conform to the standards of the civilized world: there were wars, people were primitive, and there were few recognized educational institutions or capitalistic companies. Yet Europe respected the Balkans for its fight against the Ottoman Empire and regarded it as the last defense against the Muslim, medieval world (Todorova); all of the Balkan countries were conquered and incorporated in the Ottoman Empire. As late as 1912, Albania, Macedonia, and Thrace were under the Empire, which caused the First Balkan War and forced the Ottomans to retreat to Istanbul. In return, "the central pathos of all separate Balkan discourses (with the sole exception of the Turkish) is that they are not only indubitably European, but have sacrificed themselves to save Europe from the incursions of Asia; a sacrifice that has left them superficially tainted but has not contaminated their essence" (Todorova 59).

In the new war context of the 1990s, the Balkans and *balkanization* were enriched by new meanings and new—mostly journalistic—readings, of which the most radical was that of American journalist Robert Kaplan, presented in his book *Balkan Ghosts* (1993). Kaplan covers the war in the former Yugoslavia and predicts that "the whole peninsula has entered a cataclysmic period that will last for many years" (x). He claims that not

[8] Sometimes scholars include the European part of Turkey but exclude Slovenia as a Balkan country.

only were the Balkans the cradle of all of the terrorist movements ("Whatever has happened in Beirut or elsewhere happened first, long ago, in the Balkans" xxiii), but that also Nazism originated in the Balkans. Kaplan, for the purpose of his argument, makes an exception and includes Austria as part of the Balkans.[9]

> Twentieth-century history came from the Balkans. Here men have been isolated by poverty and ethnic rivalry, dooming them to hate. Here politics has been reduced to a level of near anarchy that from time to time in history has flowed up the Danube into Central Europe. Nazism, for instance, can claim Balkan origins. Among the flophouses of Vienna, a breeding ground of ethnic resentments close to the southern Slavic world, Hitler learned how to hate so infectiously. (Kaplan xxiii)

American President Bill Clinton used this book as the crucial evidence that the U.S. intervention was not needed in the former Yugoslav's war (1993), because the area was uncontrollable and people in this region have always killed each other; killing was written into their genetic codes (Lipsky). However, "If that were true, there would be either nobody left or the region would have been cleansed and homogenized, so there would be no problem. There is a disingenuous double standard in the West's attitudes disparaging language, *Balkan Ghosts* was one of the *New York Times'* bestsellers for

[9] His reading is problematic for many reasons (e.g. Slavs and Gypsies were Holocaust victims, Hitler lived in Berlin for most part of his life, Nazism is not a disease which miraculously spread from the Balkans . . .) but it seems that the crucial one lays in Austria's history. Kaplan finds the Balkans a synonym for primitive because it is underdeveloped and "different." Yet, Austria was established after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in 1918, whose territory included, among other countries, today's Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia. Austria cannot be the despised Other because it was a European power until the end of the World War I and it used its position to promote stereotypes, especially about the Balkans. Also, Klagenfurt, "an El Dorado for former Nazis" (Kaplan xxv), the town Kaplan considers the ultimate proof that Nazism originated in the Balkans, has been a German speaking town since the 8th century. However, Klagenfurt is only 10 miles away from the Slovenian border.

years, and it not only earned Kaplan a reputation as an "expert" for the region, but also skyrocketed his fame. From a struggling journalist, he became one of the "post-cold-war world's most widely read thinkers. . . . He was a voice to be heeded, and he ascended to a dream zone of influence, lecturing at the C.I.A., the F.B.I., the N.S.A., briefing the Joint Chiefs of Staff" (Lipsky par. 2).

Unsurprisingly, these readings provoked a scholarly reaction that, interestingly enough, developed into a dispute between postcolonial and Balkan scholars. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the most prominent voice of postcolonial studies, and Maria Todorova, a historian who introduced Balkan studies to literature, openly oppose each other. Spivak claims that the Balkans is a typical postcolonial space, while Todorova, in her book *Imagining the Balkans* (1997), argues that the region has never been defined by a colonial empire such as the US or Great Britain. Todorova defines the territory as a "border" one, in perpetual conflict between the East and West, and declines to categorize it as "oriental" or "postcolonial."[10] She claims that the Ottoman Empire never managed to impose Turkish as the official state language, that the Balkan people never thought about themselves as marginalized, that the abyss between local and central power never existed, and that the Balkan people never considered Istanbul as the cultural or political center of their own countries. Also, there is a historical and geographic concreteness to the Balkans that cannot be attributed to the Orient. When one thinks about the Balkans, adds Todorova, it is always within the concept of "imputed ambiguity" (17), while the Orient represents the "imputed Otherness" (17). Fascinatingly, none of the scholars

[10] Edward Said first introduced the term "orientalism," which implies the discourse about the East by the West. The Orient is discovered, recorded, defined—invented—by the West. See: Edward Said. *Orientalism.* New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

question the negative implication of the Balkans' Otherness; both of them agree that the Balkans is represented as the shameful European Other.[11]

However, the question is, who is the audience for those intellectuals? Unlike Todorova, who is recognized beyond the geographical boundaries of the former state, ex-Yugoslav scholars and writers have a limited audience of their ex- compatriots and a few Slavic scholars in the West.[12] Although most of those in exile claim that they were forced to leave their countries, the only real audience they have is often in the country they bitterly left, and within the language they are not sure is theirs any more.[13] Even when their works are translated into Western languages, their presence in the foreign country is insignificant. Also, unlike Žižek and Todorova, who easily travel between the East and the West because they are not stigmatized by the war, often Balkan writers are considered, although unfairly, self-referential and exclusively associated with trauma discourse. In their home countries, they are praised not only because of their intellectual and literary contributions but also because they are symbolic victims of the war and, paradoxically, their absence allows their disagreement with current politics to be

[11] This thesis, although aware of this dichotomy, will not analyze it extensively. The focus of this thesis is to show how (historically) applied stereotypes and new historical contexts influence processes of identification. However, it is interesting that in almost all of the Balkan countries and Russia, Balkan scholars prefer Spivak's over Todorova's readings of the Balkans. At the AAASS conference held in November 2005 in Salt Lake City, on the panel about postcolonial and Balkan nature of Russia and Eastern European countries, Todorova was alone in an attempt to ascribe to the Balkans its own process of Othering.

[12] For instance, the Department for Eastern European and Russian History at Yale University has only two graduate students, and the group is described as "currently small." One student is a Serbian, and the other a Russian expert. See: http://www.yale.edu/history/gradstudents/russia.html

[13] Croatian exiles are eager to pose those questions. Dubravka Ugrešić and Slavenka Drakulić form their narratives around this dilemma. See: Dubravka Ugrešić: The *Museum of Unconditional Surrender.* New York: New Directions, 1999 and Slavenka Drakulić. *S: A Novel about the Balkans.* New York: Viking, 2000.

admired. Eventually, it seems there is not even a possibility for a dialogue; the more they want to remove stereotypical images from the Balkans and themselves, the more they are pushed back exactly into the very same discourse and closer to the country they unwillingly left. On the other hand, any attempt to dislocate themselves from the motherlands intensifies their identity problems: *If there is not an audience, how one can claim to be a writer or a scholar? Is it possible to escape trauma, if trauma is the kernel of one's identity?*[14]

Serbian writer David Albahari (b. 1948) is one of a few authors who surpassed the local classifications and whose fiction has been translated into 14 languages. And yet, his prose is full of the recent historical Balkan experience. In France, his works have been published for years by Gallimard; German audiences read his latest novel *Leeches* (2005) just months after it had been published in the Serbian language; and he has two publishing representatives for the United States and Great Britain. In Serbia, he is one of the best contemporary authors and the most acclaimed writers of his generation, despite the fact that he has lived in Calgary, Canada for more than a decade and visits Serbia only when a new book is published or he receives an award. Although all of his books after 1993 are written in exile, they are first published in Belgrade and then translated into other languages. Albahari is an exclusive author of one of one of the best Serbian publishing houses, *Stubovi kulture.*[15]

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[14] This thesis sees identity as a fluid, not fixed, category and as a product of cultural circumstances (e.g. theories of Michel Foucault introduced in his *The Archeology of Knowledge*). In the same manner, when Albahari and his characters refer to national identity, they never think of an ethnic background but identify themselves with a state (the former Yugoslavia) or a region (the Balkans, Europe). See: Thomas Robert. *The Politics of Serbia in the 1990s*. New York: Columbia UP, 1999.

[15] See: www.stubovi.co.yu

While Albahari had published almost a dozen short story collections and novels before the war in the former Yugoslavia, his prose became interesting for the West once he started to talk about contemporary events.[16] Deftly including the tropes of Jewishness and history, and discussing collective and individual guilt in a war, Albahari surmounted the label of a "local," "Balkan" author. His prose became understandable and interesting for the audience outside of Serbia, even though sometimes his fiction (as this thesis will show) suffers from political over-simplification.

It is interesting that although he had translated contemporary classics of Jewish literature (by Saul Below, Josef Brodsky, Isaac Singer), Albahari did not invoke his Jewish identity until well after the publication of his first collection of stories (*Family time*, 1973). His Jewish identity became prominent as a theme in his writing once the ethnic war started and Albahari, as he claimed, needed to go into exile in order to escape Milosevic's regime. Similarly, Albahari was not publicly engaged in the Jewish community until 1991, when he led the Federation of Jewish Communes of Yugoslavia and helped to evacuate the Jewish population from Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Calgary, he started his "Canadian circle" (*Snow Man*, *Bait*, *Darkness*, *Leeches*), the novels which were aimed toward a Serbian audience but written with a consciousness about the Western perspective about the war. Evoking Jewishness, Albahari "became" a Jewish diaspora author and, ironically, made himself more accessible for a Western audience. Albahari thus does not limit war trauma, as do many ex-Yugoslav authors, to

[16]Collections of stories: *Porodicno vreme* (*Family time*, 1973), *Opis smrti* (*The Description of Death*, 1982), *Fras u supi* (*Shock in a shack*, 1984), *Jednostavnost* (*Simplicity*, 1998), *Pelerina* (*The cloak*, 1993); novels: *Sudija Dimitrijevic* (*Judge Dimitrijevic*, 1978), *Cink* (*Zinc,* 1988), *Kratka knjiga* (*Short book*, 1993). He won, among many awards, the Ivo Andric Award for the best collection of short stories in Yugoslavia in 1982, the NIN Award for the best novel in Yugoslavia in 1996 (*Bait*) and the inaugural Balkanika Award in 1997.

his personal experience and suffering but transforms it into a literary trope. His novels are not only stories about the Balkan war, or political resistance to the regime, but also texts that try to rationalize a relationship between the historical and personal (is there a space for the personal if history forces people to change continents?), and intercultural relationships (might the Balkan war be understandable, once an Eastern European is introduced to the Western scorn of Eastern Europeans?).

Yet Albahari's first book in English, the collection of stories *Words are Something Else* (1996), introduces him as a strictly dissident and political author. Charles Simic and Tomislav Longinović, who wrote the Foreword and Afterward, insisted on the elements of resistance and Jewishness in Albahari's works.[17] Longinović also defined him as a Central European author, which is a mistaken geographical and cultural definition of the Balkans. From a distance of ten years, those attempts to portray Albahari as a political dissident seem incorrect because Albahari's early prose was anti-realistic and played with highly artistic linguistic and stylistic structures that substituted for (personal) identity. Albahari's prose, fragmented and often autopoetical, suggested that language stands between human thought and the "real" world.[18] His early work might be classified as "metafiction," because it poses questions about the ontological relationship between fiction and reality and systematically addresses the anti-realist strategies of writing.[19]

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[17] David Albahari. *Words Are Something Else*. Trans. Ellen Ellas-Bursac. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1996. It is fascinating that American reviewers tried to argue (for or against) Albahari's position as a Central-European, Jewish, while those with the "native" background explained the geneses of the collection and analyzed his poetics.

[18] See: Frederic Jameson. *The Prison House of Language. A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972.

[19] See: Linda Hutcheon. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1989.

However, influenced by the social changes and ethnic clashes in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s, Albahari's fiction became a response to history and an attempt to recapitulate reality within the epic form; his experimental prose turned into historical realism. His identity was developed into an identity of the historical moment—and the historical moment was manifested as a stereotypical Western/Eastern experience about the region. History did not allow an author to be lost in postmodern metafiction; history needed to be analyzed and authors needed to take sides.

In his novels he activates stereotypes formed by binary oppositions and which are present in both the Balkan and Western cultures: the primitive Balkans misunderstand the New World, while at the same time the pragmatic and capitalistic New World is not able to see through the Balkan Otherness. For Westerners/outsiders, everybody is equally responsible for the war and Milosevic's empowerment because the peoples, not individuals, participated in the war. However, for insiders—Albahari and his characters—collective responsibility does not exist because the people were either manipulated by the government or completely denied any authority by the fact that the war started. Albahari does not recognize collective responsibility for the war; only certain individuals in power can be blamed for the ethnic clashes and the collapse of the country. Collective guilt leads to an identity Albahari does not want to accept because it equates him with those who forced him (and his narrators) to leave the country. Again, an identity confusion is unavoidable.[20] As the next two chapters show, for Albahari, these identity problems lead either to suicide (*Snow Man*) or the alienation of the true self in

[20] In Serbia, the discussion about the guilt and responsibility of an intellectual was presented in the thematic issue of the literary magazine *Reč* 57.3 (2000). All of the scholars mentioned or implied a relationship between post-Third Reich Germany and Yugoslavia. Also, long excerpts from Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* were also published.

life (*Bait*); in both cases, tragic consequences are caused by cultural misunderstanding and stereotypical categories that are used as fundamental means of communication.

Chapter 2

History as a Curse: *Snow Man*[21]

In December 1996, the editors of the magazine *Reč*, the most influential Serbian literary magazine of the 1990s, announced that the poetics of Serbian literature were changing. In the Editors' Note about the thematic issue titled "History and Comments: Revival of the Historical Novel?" they pointed out that "in the last few years the Serbian novel was characterized by emphasized interests for narratives of historical and new historical totality" (73). In other words, the stories had topics "from the Middle Ages to the war in Bosnia, from Saint Sava to Josip Broz to Slobodan Milošević, from the destiny of the nation to the destiny of civilization" (Editors' Note 73). According to the editors, there were two models of historical novels—pathos and parody. The first, and more prevalent, ignored post-historical, post-structural, or post-modern concerns, and it tried to restore a romanticized version of Serbian history and apply it to the new historical context. The second were parodic novels in which there can be "sensed the tragedy of [the] modern historical sensibility" and in which "historical truth is not superior to novelistic treatment of history" (Editors' Note 73). Therefore, *Reč* decided to publish a thematic issue dedicated not to those "patriotic" historical novels that "tend to correct historiographical misconceptions and thus affirm a concept of *applied literature,*"[22] but

[21] The text in this chapter from pages 24-34 was published in my article "Politics of Representation" in *Serbian Studies* 18 (2006): 1-18. In this thesis, the text is significantly revised.

[22] In this case, "applied" refers to literature that supported the regime, or provided quasi-scientific or quasi-historical proof that the Serbian aggression and the war were historically justified. For instance, in romance novels promiscuous lovers, or morally problematic men, were Croats or Milosevic's supporters, depending on the author's position (See: Damjana Mraović: "Ljubavni romani kao oruzje politike: zene za i protiv srpskog rezima" ("Love Stories as a Political Weapon: Women For and Against the Serbian Regime.") *Koraci* 3-4 (2005): 113-142. Internet version: http://www.redrival.com/koracikg/Koraci.htm), while historical novels at the same time romanticized the Serbian Middle Ages and argued that the 1990s were

to those contemporary novels that "parody and problematize the identification of history, story and novel" (Editors' Note 73).

However, none of the critics presenting work in that issue focused on the problem stated in the Editors' Note. All of them, in fact, examined canonical Serbian writers of the twentieth century (Danilo Kiš, Miloš Crnjanski, Borislav Pekić, Dorbica Ćosić), and when they dared to talk about younger authors (Radoslav Petković, David Albahari), they compared them to the older ones. Therefore, *Reč*'s special issue failed to address either topic announced in the Editors' Note: it did not deal with the newest historical novels, and it did not distinguish them from "pulp" production described only as "applied literature" (Editors' Note 73). The issue's editors excluded a major part of the new "parodic" literary production/political agenda—dominant although rather ideologically problematic—yet said that they supported the new parody and were aligned with "the 'Other Serbia'": an urban middle class opposed to Milosevic's politics. The editors thus inadvertently exposed a central confusion about art and identity that was surfacing at that moment.

The Revival of the Historical in Fiction

Slobodan Naumović claims that "In the Serbian context of the nineties, whether one was writing from an anti-Milošević or a pro-Milošević position seemed more important than whether one was Serbian or not" (104). A unifying force of national identity, as well as personal identity, was not one's ethnic background (Serbian), but the

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the moment when a historical stream of Serbian national glory, interrupt by the Turkish invasion in the 15th century, would be re-established.

people's stand toward Serbian politics (pro/contra Milošević). As in any dictatorship, the government used the phrases "non-patriotic" and "patriotic" in relation to its highly nationalistic and exclusive politics, so those who opposed the regime were reluctant to claim their national identity. To be a Serb meant to be anything from an aggressor and killer to a primitive Balkan person.

Naumović claims that the fact that the war (1991-1995) was not fought on Serbian territory, but first in Slovenia and later in Croatia and Bosnia, did not allow the formation of a *consensus* regarding the war. Instead, the events were presented in a Manichean manner: Serbia should be considered either a victim of an illegitimate request for independence by a few Yugoslav republics, or a nationalistic aggressor dreaming of a Greater Serbia, a quixotic idea based on the premise of "one ethnicity—one state." Such binary thinking polarized political and cultural life into what Naumović described as a concept of "two Serbias," "Us" and "Them." He writes that the political preferences of authors, scholars, and feminists helped dichotomize "Us vs. Them" into two bundles of stereotypes:

> *Victim/Us/the "Other Serbia"*: the urban middle class, awakened citizens, cosmopolitan urbanities with modern, postmodern predispositions, positive energy of the civil society, strong democratic orientation, non-authoritarianism, non-conformism, rule of law, preference of freedom over egalitarism, prone to "westernization" and a western model of society, open toward the world, patriotism but not chauvinism, unrestrained humor, keen satire and parody.

> *Aggressor/Them/Milošević's Serbia*: blind nationalistic mob, easy to manipulate, catastrophic political strategy of the anarchistic leader, hatred, intolerance and isolationism, archaic, rural, patriarchal, suffering from an "authoritarian syndrome," Milošević's despotic personal rule, bellicose, blindingly chauvinistic propaganda, "balkanized" Balkans. (Naumović 107)

In literature, this polarization was manifested in "low" fiction (love and historical stories), regardless of whether the text supported or opposed the regime or was on the top of the bestseller lists. But the polarization also appeared in "high" literature in which real war became the main literary topic. Critics recognized one type of book (the "Them" book) in which the literary expression was used for justifying "holy national truths" (Pantić par. 7), but they also acknowledged and praised some books ("Us" books) as "new Serbian war prose" (Pantić par. 3). Although it was never stated, mostly because critics and scholars were addressing a small circle of like-minded people/readers not accepted in Milošević's Serbia, this literature was considered, by readers and authors, intellectual opposition to the tragic events and the actual politics that only rarely attracted the public's attention.

However, "new Serbian prose" that conformed to neither pole in the "Us vs. Them" binary was a cultural phenomenon rarely addressed by scholars. The new war prose focused on a traditional topic of Serbian literature but had the political ambiguity and postmodern play of "Us" fiction. Yet in his text "New War Prose," Mihajlo Pantić claims that "twentieth century Serbian literature is for the most part, if not even crucially, written in the name of a war experience, in a thematic as well [as] in an epistemological

sense" (par. 4). For instance, the periodization of Serbian literature, which Pantić considers the ultimate argument for war influences, creates a tripartite division of periods: the pre-war literature (up to 1914), the literature between the wars (1914-1941), and the post-war literature (1945-1990). Rather poetically (but unfortunately accurately), Pantić further calls this phenomenon "literature chronically between wars" (Pantić par. 4). He adds that one of the best Serbian authors, Ivo Andrić (1892-1975), is known not by his love stories, but by the "war chaos in Bosnia that lasted a few centuries" (par. 4), while Miloš Crnjanski's most famous and influential Serbian collection of poems begins with a statement that "a return from a war is the saddest man's experience" (par. 4). Thus, writes Pantić, "There is not, in fact, any important Serbian writer whose pages were not violently colonized by a war" (Pantić par 4). Therefore, the contemporary literary production in which he distinguished two main streams of war representations are consequences of a *traditional* literary situation in which authors recognize "the basic condition of instability of this place's reality, and there where instability is, there is a commencement of a story" (Pantić par. 5). Pantić adds, "where everything is right, there is nothing to talk about" (par. 5). Thus while scholars wrote about and encouraged postmodernist parody in fiction, they did so in the face of literary production obsessed by war.

In the work of younger Serbian authors, new realist fiction combines characteristics of both sides of the "Us vs. Them" binary. Characters are affected by historical events on which they cannot have any significant personal influence, causing feelings of desperation and hopelessness named by Pantić as "new defeatism," similar to the state of mind expressed in Serbian novels after the First World War. The novels

inspired by the ethnic clashes in the 1990s often present deeply confused male protagonists who are lost in the present, psychologically questioning the political moment, while they attempt, physically, to survive. As in "Us" novels, the war is depicted from an urban perspective (mostly the capital of Belgrade or Sarajevo) and from that of marginalized characters. Pantić concludes that the ideological subtext of these novels is "an indirect, literary, but in that sense more worthy and deeper, notion about what the last war was like: dirty, crazy, mean, unnecessary, of no sort" (par. 7). Therefore, the newer novels actually resent Serbian political reality, as well as all Serbian literature inspired by war. They are a critical commentary on the "absurdity" that excludes the Eastern part of the world from the Western, but also an objection to fatalistic "Balkan destiny" or "Balkan hatred." In that sense, these newer novels also include stereotypes typical of "Them" novels.

The older "Us vs. Them" Serbian war novels, or at least those considered canonical achievements, have dealt with stereotypes. These stereotypes were formed in the 1920s by authors appalled by the war, were continued in the 1950s by the discussion about ideology (Stalinism and communism), and in the 1990s were transformed into an attempt to deconstruct cultural stereotypes about the Balkans/East and were activated by the war. In the new war novels, rarely are these stereotypes denied *or* refused: the novels ambiguously confirm *and* reject the image of Balkan peoples described as "incomplete selves," produced by "border states" associated with crossroads and bridges (a metaphor for the unique geographical position between East and West) and civilizations caught in the industrial phase (half-developed, half-primitive). Maria Todorova says that "For the former Yugoslavs, too, Balkaness serves to sustain their Croatianness, Serbianness,

Macedonianness, and so on pure and innocent, or at least salvageable, while enabling them to externalize their darker side" (53).

David Albahari is one of these authors of the new generation, although he is mentioned in Pantić's essay only as a writer who excluded history for a long time, but who eventually "just surrendered himself" (par. 4) to novels full of war chill. This is not entirely true. While Albahari's novels do not conform neatly to one of the poles of the "two Serbias concept," they do repeat the urban and male "Us" perspective of other 1990s war fiction and they do not have characteristics of "Milošević's Serbia" ("Them" novels). In Albahari's novels, the representation of the war is based on Western and Balkan stereotypes about the Balkans that are either adopted or, once recognized, modified in his prose. For him, identity itself, which was once expressed only as a construct of language, was developed into an identity of the historical moment, and the historical moment was manifested as a stereotypical Western/Eastern experience about the region. He became one of the writers of new war fiction.

Stereotypes as Constitutional Elements of the World

In his book *Stereotyping*, Michael Pickering claims that stereotypes are inaccurate because they portray a group or category as homogeneous by isolating certain forms of behavior, dispositions, or propensities from their context, and associating those elements with anyone connected with that group or category. Stereotypes impose uniformity, because "for those who use a particular stereotype, this may create an element of order by seeming to lock a category irrevocably into its place, in an apparently settled hierarchy of relations. The feeling of security and or superiority resulting from this may help to

explain why such imprecise referencing of other people or other cultures spreads rapidly and is taken uncritically on a widespread basis" (Pickering 4). Pickering concludes that "imprecise representations" (4) create an illusion of precision and order, the ways in which things should be arranged, and thus they are inseparable from the existing power structures because they provide a "sense of certainty, regularity and continuity" (4) of the social discourse. He adds that if we move from the perspective of order to the perspective of power, it is obvious that what represents an achieved aim for some is a loss for others because they are "fixed into a marginal position or subordinate status and judged accordingly" (5). In short, stereotypes are a means by which social tranquility can be accomplished and therefore they are particularly effective in a crisis, when people seek a "shelter" or a "virtual order" imposed through state/power institutions.

However, Pickering states that, in modern theory, stereotyping is different from otherizing. An Other, although defined originally as a stereotype, is de-historicized and "works as an obstacle to change and transformation" (48). The Other is constantly on the margin, and "identity is in this way dependent on the difference that has been translated into Otherness" (Pickering 49). He differentiates "old" stereotypes from the "new" Other. Stereotypes have content that is historically conditioned, they can be used as a power tool by any authority institution (government, state), and they can be historically manipulated. Stereotypes are easily reestablished within any political/social/cultural context and they, consequently, have a characteristic of time. On the contrary, the Other is an empty identity which represents only a marginal opposition to any widely accepted and dominant identity. The Other is omnipresent, and its only social function is oppositionality. The Other is not activated by a change of a political/social context; it is

an everlasting category (e.g. the Roma people are not "Us"; Jews are not "Us").

Todorova claims that the stereotypes about the Balkans, or as she calls them, "the frozen image of the Balkans"(184), are really "Otherization." Though they were formed around World War I, they represented the Balkans not as a primitive image of Europe, but as an uncivilized Other to the Europe of only a few generations ago. She insists instead on a historical process: the Balkans is not the European contemporary Other (in Pickering's understanding of the term). More importantly, the peninsula bluntly shows that Europe was also once "primitive" and "barbarian." According to her, that is exactly the image that Europe does not want to accept; it does not want to see itself as a region which was submitted to a process of historical growth because that would lead to a conclusion that the Balkans are not "Other."

In this sense, Albahari's switch to realist narration and stereotypes can be explained by the insufficiency of his linguistic postmodernism and highly poetical metafiction in the changed historical conditions. He now seeks the stability of historical stereotypes. Although in Albahari's earlier works language was the central *organizer* of total human experience—which enabled him to conclude, like the American postmodernist John Barth, that "all stories have already been told and nothing is left"—in the new reality, language itself became inadequate for a systematization of the catastrophic reality by which the author was possessed.[23] His metafictional structures, as it is suggested by the novels generally known as "the Canadian cycle" (*Snežni čovek (Snow Man)*, 1995; *Mamac (Bait)*, 1996; *Mrak (Darkness),* 1997), were justified up to

[23] See John Barth. "The Literature of Exhaustion." *The Friday Book.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997. 62-77.

that moment when the author had complete control over his fictional world, when reality and art were distinctly separated because the historical context did not offer plots that could be more interesting than those invented. Nevertheless, when history created a situation that demanded a person to take a side and act in the epoch (*Why do people get killed? What is the purpose of the war?*), the impartial poetical/theoretical approach collapsed. Thus, a new system needed to be created, and Albahari turned to grand themes (history, politics, nation, ethnicity, economy) and historical stereotypes.

Moreover, Albahari's relocation to Canada, and thus from the country he writes about, leads him to stereotype-based narratives in the face of Otherization. From the moment Albahari left the former Yugoslavia, he became aware of how the Balkans is Other in Western definitions of his country, and vice-versa. In his work, the Balkans and Europe equally misunderstand the New World, while at the same time the pragmatic and capitalistic New World is not able to see through European Otherness. The irony of Albahari's paradigm is that while he attacks this otherization, he uses stereotypes. Because "the Other" is always an empty category, its binary content will always be in process of formation and reformation: simplistic, predictable characteristics of the "Other" will be opposed to those of the diectic "I." In contrast, Pickering's stereotypes are limiting but have content and can be useful for identity formation. Albahari thus uses stereotypes as he confronts, in exile, otherization.

The Balkans is otherized as semideveloped, semicolonial, semicivilized, brutal, tribal, and politically unstable; this is a "virtually axiomatic" notion, "a negative self-perception hovers over the Balkans next to strongly disapproving and disparaging outside perceptions" (Todorova 38). In *Bait* and *Snow Man*, Albahari supports Todorova's main

premise, but sullenly concludes that not only do imposed stereotypes reveal internal or external power positions, but also that escape from these stereotypes is impossible. There seems to be no space outside of stereotypes for the exile to reside. On the one hand, the exile fights otherization; on the other hand, he depends upon stereotypes for communication with those from inside and outside his home culture. Existential horror, typical of Albahari's early work, is thus unavoidable, for history and stereotypes are *realistic* proof that misunderstanding is inevitable. Terror is not only a consequence of (post)modern alienation, but it is also a cultural identity which Balkan individuals inherit.

A Literary Transition: *Snow Man*

In 1994, David Albahari moved to Canada. Living in Belgrade, Serbia become life-threatening for him and with the help of the University of Iowa, where he participated in 1986 in the International Writing Program, and Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, he was offered a position as international writer-in-residence at the University of Calgary.[24] There he wrote *Snow Man* (1996), the first novel of his "Canadian circle," which is focused on a new Canadian émigré's experience. Albahari is determined to distinguish himself from his narrator, and in the interview incorporated in this thesis, he claims that the novel is based on the other peoples' experiences. He says that Americanized culture was familiar to him even before coming to Canada and that he did not experience any cultural shock.

[24] Albahari is currently a freelance writer and translator and usually says that he is a writer who lives on his wife's salary.

Yet all of Albahari's novels, even the most recent one published in October 2005, *Pijavice* (*Leeches*), are written in the first-person perspective and in similar formats: the entire book is one paragraph, and the narrator is a male intellectual who is exiled to Canada because of the war in the former Yugoslavia. Although the narrator is not the same character in all of the books, all of the narrators are obsessively concerned with dislocation and the horrors of identity crisis caused by the war, as well as with the cultural differences they face. In *Snow Man,* the narrator also critiques the patronizing attitude of the West toward the former Yugoslavia as an "iron curtain" country, although in *Snow Man*, Albahari is cautious not to mention from which country his narrator is fleeing. As a result, the narrator's tragic situation is not a symbol of Eastern European ineptitude, but poses questions about individual unhomeliness[25] within any historical and cultural context. According to Albahari, the fact that his characters are from the former Yugoslavia is a historical coincidence, not a political statement:

> I think that audiences in the West expect that for writers coming from Eastern Europe, being politically active was something expected of you simply because you were born, or lived there. . . . I always fought against that, for several reasons. The main reason was (that) living in Yugoslavia was different than living in other Eastern communist countries——more relaxed, more open than, say, Russia or Poland. So we were free to publish and translate whatever we wanted, including works by East European dissidents, which you couldn't find in any of their own countries, but you could in Serbia. My generation grew up fighting against the

[25] For a definition of this term in postcolonial theory see: Homi Bhabha. *The Location of Culture.* New York: Routledge, 1994.

> idea that writing should be political, your primary concern. We saw ourselves as postmodern authors. (Evans par. 10)

Unlike many exiles who are nostalgic in order to establish, as Svetlana Boym claims, "frameworks that mark but do not define the individual memory" (xviii), and satisfied once they dislocate themselves from a hated context/country, Albahari's narrator is angry. According to him, there is not any space for longing for the old country because that country was at the very core of the personal chaos of his characters. Therefore, he is not fascinated by the reason of exile but its consequences.

Boym writes that there are two types or nostalgia, restorative and reflective, and I would argue that neither of them can be found in *Snow Man.* Restorative nostalgia "attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home" (Boym xviii). In other words, it is the basis for all national and religious revivals of a specific historical moment (e.g. glory of the monarchy in contemporary Russia). On the other hand, reflective nostalgia critically examines the past and it is often expressed through works of art. Boym claims that reflective nostalgia "can present an ethical and creative challenge," (Boym xviii), while restorative nostalgia is often kitschy, articulated as "midnight melancholias" (Boym xviii). In contrast, Albahari's understanding of nostalgia is rather different. He recognizes it but negates any possibility that his character is nostalgic and refuses to write the novel within a nostalgic position. He is not unreasonably fond of the past and he is not interested in analyzing ethical or historical elements of the past: "'Nostalgia kills,' said the professor, 'if corn felt nostalgic,' he said, 'it would never produce cobs rich with kernels.' I was at a loss for words. I had never imagined myself as a corncob" (Albahari 27).

The narrator is more interested in present that the past, and even this "present" is deliberately generalized. Historical events cause the narrator's displacement, and his rage intensifies because he does not perceive himself as a political rebel. Although *Snow Man* is a deft critique of Yugoslav political and historical events, it does not evaluate the Yugoslav past and it does not openly refer to the country its narrator leaves. The geographical precision must be written into the text by the reader from reality itself. Albahari's novel counts on the reader's knowledge about foreign policies, but its meaning is not limited by its local context.[26] For example, everybody around the narrator makes references to a war, but when at a book reading the narrator is asked about the reflections of the current war in his prose, his answer is not only amusing but also dismissive: "Every person is his own country . . . and therefore, my writing hasn't undergone any change at all. . . . Which country do you have in mind?" (Albahari 47). *Snow Man* is, thus, rooted in a paradox: it is a novel about current history, and yet historical knowledge is not a prerequisite for understanding the book's meaning. The history is represented by stereotypes that Albahari and his narrator try to fight (e.g. Eastern Europe is the cradle of all horrific historical events; an émigré must be radically critical of his country). Consequently, the book is not only about the Balkan war but also about identity.

Atypical for Serbian contemporary literature, whose authors often talked about communism or Milosevic's regime through the motifs of eighteenth and nineteenth

[26] The American publisher of the novel also emphasizes the universal meaning of the novel. On the front cover, it is said that "To leave your complex, war-torn country only to find yourself a refugee in the safe but almost sterile world of a Canadian university can be an unbearably shocking experience." The back cover, however, positions Albahari within a specific context with the opening sentence, "David Albahari is one of the most important Serbian authors." A few sentences later, it is explained that "He wrote *Snow Man* shortly after arriving in Canada in 1994, when Serbia was in flames."

century Serbian migrations,[27] Albahari's displacement refers to the 1990s. His exile status is signified rather than described: *Snow Man*'s opening recalls the Biblical exodus. The narrator is at an airport, "just as I'd been told he'd be" (Albahari 1), where a driver recognizes him without a single spoken word because "the bag told me it was you. The suitcase told me, too, but the bag was more insistent" (Albahari 4). Since the narrator stands in an immigration line, with families from India and Pakistan, and later mentions that in one towel he brought he had wrapped manuscripts and in another photographs, he draws a picture of a typical twentieth-century intellectual émigré. While his bag *marks* him as worn out, different, out-of-date, and above all, recognizable as the Other, the immigration line suggests that he came to stay in the environment that is foreign to him. That he is waited for, paradoxically, emphasizes his strangeness. The narrator needs to be introduced to the new country; the driver is not only his benevolent host but also an initiator of his new existence. The transition is almost a religious one: behind the sliding exit door, while completing the customs procedure, the narrator can see the driver waiting for him. Once the driver sees the narrator (or his bag), he immediately knows that the narrator is the *one,* not "ours." In addition, the manuscript and the photos indicate that Albahari's narrator is an expelled writer. The manuscript wrapped in a towel, or even an embroided towel, is a common motif in Eastern European literature that can be traced back to the 19th century. Although immigrants often leave in a rush, their decisions are

[27] For instance, the books mentioned in Editors' Note in *Reč, Seobe* (Migrations) by Miloš Crnjanski and *Sudbina i komentari* (Fate and Commentaries) by Radoslav Petković, are typical. *Seobe* is focused on the migration of Serbs in the mid 18th century, while *Sudbina* describes a Serbian émigré community in Trieste, Italy in the 19th century. However, both of them refer also to contemporary events—Crnjanski to communist Yugoslavia and Petković to the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

carefully thought out—they pack only the most necessary things, while the most precious ones are traditionally wrapped in towels.[28]

Towels symbolize immaculate cleanness, softness, and home. They should protect the treasured objects from unexpected trauma and they should *clean* all of the dirt of the new world. To a certain extent, towels are talismans. In the industrial era, where every towel is the same, they still have the same symbolic meaning. Similarly, photos are the most valuable of an immigrant's items; an émigré might be ready to leave material goods behind with no regret, but he never leaves photos. They represent history of both a family and a country and without them a person, who is already leaving his country and is prone to identity confusion, would be lost in the new environment.[29] These photos, although nonchalantly mentioned in Albahari's narrative, stand for what Roland Barthes describes as the ability of photography to be simultaneously present in the present and in the past, and to connect space temporality. Barthes claims that a photo is an embodied sign, a physical form of knowledge because it allows the past to be current in the present.[30] In that sense, it is obvious why emigres hold on to photos: they are forms of their own identities and they remind them of what they chose to abandon.

In *Snow Man*, however, there is something disturbing in the narrator's entrance to the desired country. His first words are "into the new world" (Albahari 2), and he has been repeating them "all through the flight, words that first occurred to me when I woke

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[28] "Everything was so abrupt, I thought, the departure and the arrival, especially the arrival, I still hadn't the time to collect myself, and I was still living as if in a sequence of scenes . . . as if my life had collapsed along with the history of my country—my *former* country" (Albahari 24).
[29] Most of the novels written by ex Yugoslav author in exile emphasize the importance of photos. See: Dubravka Ugrešić. *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. Trans. Celia Hawkesworth. New York, New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1999. Even the author of this article was very careful to bring her photo album to the States, when she moved here to study.
[30] Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography.* New York, Noonday Press, 1981.

up in the middle of the storm" (Albahari 2). Almost as if in an initiation, he utters these words unconsciously during a storm, when his own life is one more time in physical danger. When he repeats them next time, he is safe at the airport, with a friendly driver in sight, ready to pass the gate and enter the new country. The phrase becomes a confirmation of his "correct" decision. Yet, "later" in the house, as the narrator himself says, "[I] felt as if I were falling apart, and I thought, 'I will grow old here'" (Albahari 6). The transition from the relief after crossing the border of the new life, to the pessimistic comment about being unpleasantly captured by it, is sudden and jarring. If the narrator "falls apart" as soon as he enters the Canadian house in which he is supposed to live, his decision about coming to the new state is not only troublesome—and we immediately wonder why, then, he left the former Yugoslavia[31]—but also sets the tone for the narrator's anxiety and disappointment in the new world. The stereotype about a happy "coming out" from an Eastern European country is annulled. According to Albahari's narrator, a change in geography does not mean much because a dislocated person needs to cope with his injured identity. The narrator feels "out of place" in the country he left and in the country to which he came to live. Since his identity is injured, the narrator's physical change of countries does not help; he is internally "dislocated." However, the paradox is that his identity is injured exactly because of the political events in ex-Yugoslavia, and the internal clash he tries to solve is to distance himself from the country but to keep the identity he forged in it. [32]

[31] Since the narrator tells the novel as the past experience, it can be argued that his immediate disappointment is written into his first impression about Canada; it is a *post festum* comment.

[32] A comparison with postcolonial theory is inevitable. One of the main concerns of postcolonial writers is how to articulate their own (national) identity in a colonized country and how to maintain a difference

In addition, the historical context makes the narrator in *Snow Man* the obvious stereotype. From the moment he comes to Canada, a stereotypical image of him is seen as an obstacle to his adjustment. Although the narrator decided to go into exile because he did not support the former Yugoslav war politics, he is, in Canada, marked exactly by stereotypes about the war-torn "backward" country. He is the representative of a warlike ex-Yugoslavia and interesting not as an individual but as a person who has experienced a war. Moreover, he is expected to renounce his national identity. At the book reading, a woman "had been expecting, she said, that I would openly condemn the abuse of power in my country, though now she was wondering, she said, whether it was perhaps too late for any hope at all, especially in a country, she said, that has its hope in reviving historical memory as the sole relevant standard" (Albahari 48). At this point, although not as nuanced as in *Bait*, Albahari's interpretation resembles not only Pickering's notions about stereotypes as socially unifying, although inaccurate categories, but also Todorova's claim about the negative nature of the Balkans. The woman at the reading approaches Albahari with a set of preconceived assumptions and expects him to behave in accordance with them, while at the same time she is seemingly concerned about the future of the country. Stereotypes are a double-edged sword: they give historical concreteness to the Other but still reduce him to predictable categories. In fact, her short speech operates within the categories accepted by Western culture: exiles must dislike their country; the country is doomed because people voluntarily leave it.

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between an imposed and chosen identity. (See Homi Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 2004.)

The dual narrative of stereotypes as stabilizing yet dehumanizing is emphasized by the narrator's inability to "heal" in Canada. He is disturbed because he hates academia, the institution which helped him (and Albahari) to restart his life: "I hated the university, I hated academia, and that hatred, which I no longer felt as hatred but as a discomfort you can't avoid, mixed with the exhaustion crawling over my body . . ." (Albahari 8). The narrator explains that he hates the ambiguous position of academia: it is a system that preaches that there is not a single system that should be believed in, and yet it claims that all of the human activities can be learned. The narrator is shocked by the fact that, according to academia, even writing and all of the art forms can be learned. Ultimately, his hatred for academia originates from the same discomfort he has for the country he left. Academia is self-referential, and exclusive. If writing can be learned, like a skill—a subtle critique of American and Canadian creative writing programs—even the narrator's artistic identity is in jeopardy because it can be reduced to known skill categories, similar to stereotypes. Ultimately, he is left with nothing; he tries to abandon his ethnic identity because he is appalled by the war and the only identity he strives for, that of a skilled artist, is just another stereotype in the new environment. After all, he came to Canada to write a book.

The professor of political science, who voices all of the stereotypes the West has about the former Yugoslavia and the war, disturbs the narrator's writing the most. He internalizes those notions uncritically and disables any dialogue even before it starts; the professor teaches the narrator about his own country, which, although hilarious for readers, is obviously painful for the narrator. Yet the importance of the professor's character is more functional (to expose all of the stereotypes) than fictional (he is barely a

developed character). Since the professor does not have a name, and the narrator does not verbally oppose his preconceived judgments, allowing readers to learn about his anxiety, the professor is just a mouthpiece for an aggressive, negative, "civilized" attitude about the East. As the narrator says, "He was a professor . . . he was from the temple of knowledge, he was the only one with free access to the secret chamber behind the art of knowledge" (Albahari 23). It seems that Albahari here invokes an ambiguous position of Western scholarship, which Todorova described as illogical. It praised Tito's communist multiculturalism but considered the territory backward when it was under the "enlightened rule of the Habsburgs" (119) and in the war in the 1990s. Todorova openly asks, "Why is it, then, that 'Balkan' is used for a country at war that, before the sad events, insisted it was not Balkan and was previously not labeled Balkan but considered to be the shining star of Eastern Europe by its Western supporters," (186) and the only answer she can offer is about "the brunt of the collective stigma" (186).[33] Similarly, the professor's attitude, gradually developed throughout the entire text, can be summarized in a simple statement: the peoples of the former Yugoslavia are responsible for the war because history provides evidence that they are predisposed to conflicts. The paradox of his position is that although he is a political science expert, his disciplinary knowledge consists only of stereotypes.

First the professor compares a state with a body, claiming that its "body and legs are people" (Albahari 14), then despicably refuses the possibility that the war could have

[33] Todorova claims that the discourse about the former Yugoslavia changed because the West suddenly saw "evil," and "primitive" in the country. The war was not seen as a consequence of the historical and political circumstances but as proof of Balkan primitive nature and Western righteous suspicion toward the Balkans. The process of stigmatizing was easier, and paradoxically—logical— exactly because the West saw in the former Yugoslavia an atypical Balkan/Eastern European country.

been avoided: "[he] brushed her off with the flick of his hand and erased my words before I had even had a chance to speak them" (Albahari 23). He also nonchalantly concludes that the responsible party for the war was not the government, but the people, and finishes with an academic statement that the former Yugoslavia is a "failed experiment": "he ordered a new bottle of wine and began laying out for me his theory of the failed country, which, he claimed, gave birth to failed systems, failed products, and inevitably, he claimed, failed people. 'With a few exceptions,' he added, shooting me a meaningful glance."[34] The narrator is speechless, but the professor continues his tirade about the country that was still able to "produce such a successful culture" (Albahari 28) and hopes that he will be able to "socialize" with the narrator. Later in the narrative, the professor uses *A Historical Atlas of Central and Eastern European* as ultimate proof that that part of the world is "sick": "If there is something like chaos in nature, then that is what we have here. There's nothing else like it. *And it is spreading like an epidemic, an incurable disease*" (Albahari 56; emphasis mine). Albahari here repeats the Kaplanian conclusion about sickness of the Balkans, but, unlike Todorova who argues against it, he leaves it without comment, letting the audience to realize its absurdity. He only provides an ironical summary of his position in Canada: "Judging by the professor of political science, perhaps I didn't [exist]. Judging by history, I definitely didn't. Judging by me, I couldn't tell" (Albahari 29). However, it is questionable whether Albahari's foreign audience could grasp the full meaning of his statement. For a domestic audience, the

[34] Albahari, 27. In the 1990s, that was a very common journalistic metaphor, based on Tito's ambition to form a country which was as much Eastern as Western, did not have ethnic problems, successfully balanced between the world powers and had its own political identity. The former Yugoslavia was often compared with the federal system of the United States with the only difference being that its model failed.

phrase about the "disease" activates a wide range of negative meanings, cultural and political,[35] and makes the narrator's ironic conclusion almost tragic.

Similarly, the maps in the narrative, almost a postmodern deconstruction of the text, may pose a challenge for a non-native reader, while for the native reader they imply the obsession with territories during the war and the absurdity of the former-Yugoslav's borders. Albahari's narrator is obsessed with maps, and Albahari uses his fixation to make a blatant statement about the region's "normalcy" and its history: the Balkans (or the former Yugoslavia, for that matter) is historically "a wind-blown place," an area that was under different empires and different rulers. The Balkans was first part of the Roman (since the 3rd century) and then Byzantine (since the 11th century) Empires until the Ottoman's invasion in the 15th century and, moreover, the border-line between Western Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, after the Great Schism in 1054. Today's Bosnia and Herzegovina separate the two churches, Catholic and Orthodox (that is why Slovenia and Croatia are mostly Catholic, Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia are Orthodox, and in Bosnia these two denominations are equally present, as well as Islam). When in the 1990s scholars tried to rationalize the war, they would often talk about historically imposed conflicts and point to the Schism as one of the main historical reasons for the current violence. Todorova claims that there is also a geographical confusion about the Balkans. Geographers agree that the peninsula is defined by the seas to the east, west, and south, but there is a discrepancy about the northern and north-western borders and "This is where historical and cultural criteria enter their discourse" (Todorova 30). Todorova says

[35] The Balkans people, as Todorova shows, are very familiar with the negative image about themselves. One of the most vivid indications might be a proverb whose slight variations might be found in all of the Balkan countries: "This could happen only in the Balkans!"

that the countries that are always described as Balkan, and which she covers in her study, are Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, and all of the former Yugoslav countries except Slovenia. However, Romania, even Moldova, as well as the European part of Turkey and Cyprus, are not geographically on the peninsula; only their historical circumstances allow them to be treated as Balkan.

Having this in mind, the narrator claims that the basement full of maps made him think "of a professor of history rather than a cartographer" (Albahari 70). Therefore, Albahari suggests that there is nothing genuinely primitive about the former Yugoslav peoples. They just happen to live in a historically turbulent area, and even not a precisely defined region, which is not a sufficient argument to qualify them as "barbarians." On the other hand, the narrator does not only see the maps of the three empires and the Balkans, but also of the Near East from 1978, North America, the Mediterranean, and Europe after WWII. The basement is a representation of the world's history which, in terms of violence, is the same as the former Yugoslavia's. Since all of the maps indicate that wars were initiated either by ethnic and political disagreements or crusades for territorial enlargement, the narrator pessimistically claims,

> Had I been searching for the most apt word, I would have chosen "horror," I thought, but I wasn't searching for words. You walked among the impressions of history, among worn-out images of the past, allowing all of them to speak their language. Their languages, I should have said, I thought, because I wasn't sure that all of history speaks with the same language, just as I wasn't sure I spoke at all. (Albahari 73).

Albahari introduces maps when all of his narrator's arguments fail to persuade his main opponent, the professor of political science, that the former Yugoslavs are not primitive. The narrator claims that "I had been running from words, . . . pointless words, language condemned to the status of an empty shell, language in which nothing has value any more, in which any word can stand in for any other . . . bringing into question everyone who has opted for silence" (Albahari 68). In this case, the narrator's "silence" represents his resistance to participate in the war in the former Yugoslavia (those who did not loudly support the clashes were immediately suspicious), and, suggests that, paradoxically, the narrator's decision to leave silently the former Yugoslavia was a very "loud" action.[36]

For readers, maps are yet another point in Albahari's argument about the Balkan chaotic past, but in the narrative, maps indicate the narrator's distrust of language: "If at one time I saw every action as a cluster of words, now I was moving without language . . . " (Albahari 79). He is unable to communicate; when words are uttered, the people with whom he speaks cannot comprehend the meaning he tries to articulate. Language becomes slippery. Here the narrator's tragic insight is not primarily about his identity, which cannot be fully expressed within words, but about language's inability to transfer meanings. Linguistic exchange is futile because those who participate in it are not able to penetrate the other person's verbal "cluster"; personal and cultural identities are rigid,

[36] The similarity with Samuel Beckett's concerns about language is obvious. Albahari openly admires Beckett and, whenever asked about his favorite writers, he mentions Beckett. Also, Albahari's obsession with language can be also attributed to his interest in problems of high modernism. Although he claims he is a postmodernist, his linguistic discussions reveal his connection with the previous tradition and his very interesting position of a postmodern writer who is still interested in the subject typical for the "older" generation.

although presented within a language that is not.[37] (For example, the professor's theory about the former Yugoslav's primitivism becomes more inflexible the more he talks with the narrator; the narrator grows to hate Canadian academia the more scholars make efforts to explain it to him). It is almost as if Albahari's narrator says: "I give up. If you don't believe my words that stand for history, look at the maps. The maps don't have words and can't talk but they are telling you the truth all the same." The later narrative, after the map scene, will show that his admission of defeat is absolute.

The narrator intuitively realizes that he lives in a house full of maps: "It was as if a voice were whispering into my ear: 'I got up and, barefoot, went down into the basement'" (Albahari 70). He was "told" about the maps and he emphasizes that the information about the maps was "voiced." However, he claims that the voice was not his because "I had been silent for a while" (Albahari 70). The aloof and yet humorous comment has a double meaning: the narrator was silent because he was sleeping and the "voice" woke him up. First that happened in his former country, which is the reason he came to Canada, and then in the new country he is deprived of a voice because those who talk to him do not listen to him but *see* in him an embodiment of the Balkan stereotype. He is not a person, he is a sign of the country he did not want to represent. Thus it is not surprising that he turns to visual representations, to maps, and that after a bitter conversation about history and language with the professor, who claims that "history sucks [one] in like an underground torrent" (Albahari 73), the narrator dryly concludes: "I

[37] Although Albahari never admitted that he had read Jacques Derrida and that he had shared with him a distrust in language, the similarity with Derrida's and Albahari's theoretical premises is obvious.

had come all this way, I thought, to reduce my life to what I had wanted to avoid" (Albahari 75).

Albahari's ekphrastic argument is fairly short, not longer than five pages.[38] Yet its intensity is gradually developed, and if the points are taken cumulatively, it is evident that Albahari also tries to defend the former Yugoslavia and renounce a stereotype about its primitivism. In a way, the narrator also defends his own position as an intellectual from an Othered country. For the narrator, the maps are a part of a delayed dialogue with the professor, even though never verbalized. The professor claims that although the former Yugoslavia is primitive, there are some significant scholarly and artistic elements, and the narrator tries to say that if that were the case, if the country were primitive, this would not be possible. Moreover, if the country is represented by maps, it is not primitive. On the contrary, it has its own civilization. In the beginning, the maps he finds and puts on all of the available walls in the house provide only "discomfort" (Albahari 72), then they raise "horror" (Albahari 73), which leads the narrator to conclude that his displacement cannot provide him a peaceful life because he brought with him the cultural and historical "baggage" of his country, exactly what he wanted to avoid. Finally, standing in front of the map of Roman Empire, he concludes, "Different colors marked different conquests. I saw the word 'Germans,' I saw the word 'Slavs,' the only thing I couldn't see was the word "barbarians" (Albahari 75). Albahari here alludes to the fact that the fall of the Roman Empire was caused by a "barbarian invasion" from the North, in the 5th century. Historians believe that those "barbarians" were German and Briton

[38] Visual, in this case, refers strictly to the maps Albahari uses in the narrative. Since the narrator is not able and not allowed to speak, he turns to the maps in which he sees historical evidence that his country is a part of Western civilization.

tribes but, according to Albahari, nobody today thinks about Western Europeans as primitive. Since the Yugoslav people *speak* the general historical language, at least according to the maps, there is not a reason to call them by derogatory terms. The former Yugoslavia participates in a historical process which, although disgusting for the narrator, is not radically different from any other historical conflict or development.

Therefore, at the end of the novel, when the narrator is utterly disappointed and faces a collapse of identity, Albahari introduces a new metaphor, through a rewriting Louis Carroll's *Alice in the Wonderland*, and concludes the novel so bluntly that any analysis becomes redundant. Through a window, the narrator sees a white rabbit in the falling snow and decides to follow him. It seems to him that the rabbit lures him, waiting for him or turning back to check if he is followed. The narrator chases the rabbit in thicker and thicker snow, across the highway and into the woods, and "from that moment on I was no longer climbing . . . I was both exiting and entering at the same time. I didn't know what I was exiting from and what I was entering into, but something kept remaining behind me, just as something else kept opening before me" (Albahari 116). The narrator is between two worlds, the Canadian and the former Yugoslavian; neither of them can provide personal satisfaction because in each something is missing, and neither can be entirely embraced because there is something troublesome about each. One has too much history and the other one has too much attitude about history. Or, in the professor's words, "In Europe, one breathes the air, while here the air is eaten. In Europe, . . . one life is lived, while here everyone is changing to everyone, during a single life-time, lives at least four. When Europe falls apart, . . . people walk around like chickens with their heads cut off, while here, if something ever falls apart, they just change masks"

(Albahari 47). In Alice's manner, the narrator then eats a red and black berry in the moment the rabbit disappears from his sight. Unlike Alice, though, who undergoes a series of physical changes only to come back to the world wiser, the narrator "felt that the entering was over, that now I could only exit, to leave behind not only things but also words, language, concepts, movements and repetitions . . ." (Albahari 118). His epiphany is a realization of a complete defeat. And defeat leads to a suicide. To use a metaphor, there is not a "special door" that will allow the narrator to move freely between the two words. The gap between the East and the West is so wide that it becomes life-threatening, just as it was life-threatening for Albahari to live in Serbia in the early 1990s.

In the end, we are left wondering who narrates the novel. If the narrator surrenders and dies in the snow, mesmerized by its cleanness, it seems that his story is "voiced from the grave": "And when, a little later, the rabbit hopped cautiously towards the low *snowy form* and pushed its nose among the clustered snow-flakes, no one said anything to it" (Albahari 120; emphasis mine). As he was in life, in death the narrator is the *object and victim* of his own story, one that forces him to blend with nature, to be converted into an empty meaning free of history or personality. In that case, *Snow Man* shows the progression from stereotype to silenced Other. It becomes an apocalyptic prophesy about the end of the world, where the book's end carries on the unsuccessful exodus from the beginning. In the modern world displacement leads not to a new life but to death. It is difficult to determine who is responsible: did the former Yugoslavia kill the narrator, or the shallow sympathy of his Canadian colleagues, or his own concerns, best described in the novel's refrain, "As long as I have enough orange juice I can go through any hardship" (Albahari 9)? The final sentence of *Snow Man*, paradoxically, recalls a

fairy tale image: “Afterwards the snow stopped falling, and the moon, as it is supposed to, appeared in the sky” (Albahari 120). Similarly, the title in both Serbian and English evokes *Snow White*; but in this novel, there is not a magic kiss that will “wake” the narrator from his cultural sleep and introduce him into the world. With his death, all of the obstacles are removed (for the narrator, not for the world around him) and the *status quo* is reestablished. Albahari’s rushed and predictable conclusion can be explained by the narrator’s inability to freely live; language does not allow him to express his subjectivity, and historical circumstances impose on him the role of an object, which he is reluctant to adopt. In that sense, Albahari’s narrator suffers from the same syndrome Holocaust survivors had: “They have difficulties experiencing the events they were part of because the language at their disposal offered them only two possibilities: to take the role of either subject or object in relation to the events. But the actuality of the Holocaust was such that this distance from the action was not possible; there were no unambiguous roles of subject or object” (Van Alphen 47). Alhabari’s narrator sees death as the only way out of that situation.

However, his subsequent books have less pessimistic endings. Life-threatening misunderstanding is transformed into (only) alienation and loneliness; there is not death. Yet those who leave their countries and cultures are as excluded in new environments as they were in the war state. Keeping in mind that Albahari and his narrators are preoccupied by questioning their identities and attempting to make sense of their personal contribution to the current historical moment, it seems that to stay alive is not only a challenge, but also a severe punishment.

Snow Man is metafictional and allusive, but begins to modify these strategies with a consideration of historical context. Albahari's next book, *Bait*, will take this further. It also further problematizes the binary recognized by Naumović as "Us vs. Them," which is in *Snow Man* overshadowed by the narrator's futile attempts to be accepted and reinvent his identity in Canada. In *Snow Man*, because of the complexity of the former Yugoslav history, it is never absolutely clear who is "Us" and who is "Them." On the other hand, that opposition, once Albahari's narrator arrives to Canada, becomes utterly arbitrary because the narrator is not perceived within the context he left—as a person who opposed the war ("Us") in the Balkans—but within the context he inhabits at the moment. For Canadians, he is just another Other.

Chapter III

Politics of Representations: *Bait*

This is a revised version of a paper by the same title published in the journal S*erbian Studies* in 2006 by Damjana Mraović. Parts of the original article now also appear in Chapter II of this thesis.

Damjana Mraović. "Politics of Representations: *Bait* by David Albahari." *Serbian Studies* (18) 2005: 1-18.

In the revised version I further explored the idea of forming provisional identities through stereotypes and draw a new conclusion about Albahari's faith in a union of language and history.

Written only a year after *Snow Man*, *Bait* (1996) represents a more nuanced study about the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia and introduces a more structurally complex narrative. There are two parallel stories.[39] In the first narrative, the narrator, in fact a double of the author, listens to audiotapes, the only personal belongings he brought in exile to Canada after the war started in the former Yugoslavia. These tapes record his mother's personal story. He listens to them for the very first time after they were made and simultaneously narrates his own life, as a comment on his mother's. As the novel develops, a second narrative emerges concerning the collapse of the former Yugoslavia; the mother and son become representatives of certain stereotypes about the country, while a Canadian writer named Donald, to whom their story is being (re)told, has a stereotypical projection about not only the Balkans, but Europe as well. As a result, this narrative of the novel is occasionally interrupted by blunt commentary, which, to a

[39] Seemingly, there are three: the recordings, the narrator's immediate past, and the present with Donald. However, instead of categorizing the narrative by time sequences, the narrative is recognized as divided between two narrators: the mother (although her words are mediated, but never edited by the narrator), and the narrator himself.

certain extent, turns *Bait* into an ideological discourse. Ultimately, an understanding between these three characters is impossible because all of them consider their personal experiences as a unique way of approaching outside world. *Bait* not only shows that stereotyping disables communication but also indicates Albahari's faith in stereotypes as identity formations.

The Balkans is portrayed very differently by the *insiders* (the mother and the narrator), but then an *outsider's* (Donald's) perception is opposed to these conflicting perceptions. For the narrator's mother, "history had been a fact, a mallet that with inexorable precision had come down on her" (Albahari 12). Born in a small Bosnian town, she got married in Zagreb, Croatia, to a communist Jew from a traditional Ashkenazi family. Since she was a gentile, and the wedding was civil, the family of her husband did not recognize her or their two boys. However, when she finally decided to convert to Judaism from the Orthodox religion because she wanted "to clear the matter up" (Albahari 14), it was already 1938, and "the guns were already firing, Hitler was nibbling bits of Europe" (Albahari 14). To escape the Holocaust that started in Zagreb, the whole family moved to Belgrade, Serbia, where the father was sent to a camp and killed after a few months. The flight from Zagreb and the arrival of the German forces in town is described by a sentence that was commonplace in the former Yugoslavia, a fact developed almost into a stereotype regarding Croatian brutality and servility hidden behind false civilization: "When the Germans entered Zagreb […] they trampled through the flowers and chocolate" (Albahari 11). When the German Army came to Belgrade, however, it received no similar celebration by inhabitants; the lack of a reception served during the fifty years of Yugoslav history, and especially at the beginning of the clashes

in the 1990s, as crucial proof of the radical difference—and therefore incompatibility—of the two peoples. In order to underscore the strength of the stereotype, the narrator claims that he was very familiar with that sentence: "It was part of the family history and mythology, and I often heard it during dinner, when Father and Mother, together with their guests, talked of how it was before the war" (Albahari 11).[40] While the narrator claims that "the real meaning of the sentence was sliding away" from him as it was used in the past, now its implication is fully comprehended because it describes the war that caused his exile: "there, where I came from, a new war is going on; that is, the old is ending, unrealized goals are being achieved, as though someone has excerpted the past from a film archive and goaded the actors into continuing the opening scene" (Albahari 11). Apparently, according to the logic of this passage, it is clear which ex-Yugoslav group (the Croats) was to be held responsible for the war in the 1990s.

Nevertheless, in Belgrade the bad times for Jews also started, although "in the beginning money helped, gold still more, diamonds, too" (Albahari 16). The perspective of the mother's narration is suddenly transformed to the "we" point of view: all of the Jews did the same, we did not expect anything from life, all we did was get up and get down and then again get up. The mother intentionally excludes her own identity and embraces the collective standpoint in order to emphasize the ethnic tragedy. But then she tells her son that in order to save her family, she reasserted her Serbian identity over her

[40] This argument was wildly adopted in the former Yugoslavia and even used in other forms of arts: director Emir Kusturica in his film *Underground* (1995) activates the same stereotype. He represents the German occupation of the country in 1941 as a montage of documentary footage of Germans coming into Ljubljana (Slovenia), Zagreb and Belgrade. In Ljubljana and Zagreb, the Germans are received almost as liberators, while a parade in Belgrade was grim and quiet, without a cheering crowd on the streets. Later in the movie, Kusturica uses that difference as an *element of understanding* for Serbian resistance during the World War II, but also as a justification for the manipulative personalities of some of the characters (Marko).

Jewish heritage and escaped to Serbia. The mother's narrative about her Jewish persecution is represented by general phrases (nobody expected anything, we did not sleep, we did not live), which read as almost stereotypical comments about war.

The narrator mocks her words with a comment about his life in Canada: "My life, too, consists of getting up and going to bed and getting up again, and no matter how hard I try, I don't succeed in doing it any differently . . . " (Albahari 17). Surprisingly, although the story was told by the narrator's mother, her melancholic tone and existential confusion does not cause an expected level of sympathy for the narrator. Instead, having in mind Albahari's fascination with the failures of language, it seems that his narrator at this point activates the theoretical problem of whether identity is foundational or constructed by language: the mother, presented as a Jew, changes "names" in order to save her children, and again represents herself as an Orthodox Serb. Her identity changes are manifested through words. It is also symptomatic that the narrator tries to provoke in his mother a feeling of guilt and make her identity "selection" an ethical problem, although she pragmatically responds,

> No, I never stopped being a Serb, nor did I renounce the Jewish faith then. In war, life is a document. What was written on the paper, and on all my papers, still said that I was a Serb. I registered myself and the children as Serb refugees from the Independent State of Croatia [NDH] and we were sent to . . . one of the nearby villages. (Albahari 17).

Very deftly, Albahari again questions the role of the Croats in both wars, connecting the private with the historical stream of the novel: the NDH was formed in 1941 as a German satellite-state, with political agendas that focused on establishing an ethnically and

religiously homogenous state through the ethnic cleansing of non-Catholics and non-Croats. To contemporary Yugoslav and Serbian peoples, the NDH was considered a synonym for the Holocaust and the pogrom of the Roma people and Serbs, although before and after the 1991-95 war, the Croatian government insisted on claiming that the NDH was the first independent Croatian State in a one-thousand-year history. In the same manner, the NDH provoked stereotypical readings about Croats being Serbian enemies, and very often it was used as proof of Croatian hostility toward the Serbs. The mother was first forced to *change* her identity because she "did not exist" for her husband's family in spite of the existence presented through her sons, and later exactly that "old," abandoned identity provided her with an existence in the new historical context. Albahari's point seems to be that stereotypical and historical Balkan identities must constantly be adopted and renounced, like shifting signifiers.

But history also plays a role in the shifting of identity. Albahari's emphasis on changeable Balkan identity is also connected to his ideas about the impossibility of a subject's identification with an Other because the category of the Other, an empty, a-historical category, can be applied to anyone at any historical moment. The mother is described as a person who was "born shortly before the fall of a monarchy and the birth of a new country, and for her entire life, perhaps precisely because of that, she wouldn't know to whom she really belonged, which is the most difficult form of belonging" (Albahari 24). In short, the country of her birth, the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy, first became the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians (1918), then The Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1929), only to—shortly after World War II—turn into the National

Federative Yugoslavia, and then the Socialistic Federative Republic of Yugoslavia that fell apart in the 1990s. The mother's historical identity—even a stereotypical one—cannot be formed because the state's historical identity is not stable. The result is otherization and identity disorder.

Later in her life, however, the mother will shift from being this Other, this representative of otherness, to being a stereotypical "Balkan woman" defined by "Balkan fatalism." According to Todorova, fatalism is the belief in the concept of *adverse* Balkan fate, based on armed clashes and political immaturity, and she claims that Balkan fatalism has "a distinctly male appeal, the appeal of medieval knighthood, of arms and plots" (14). The paradox of the mother's position is that she becomes the victim of that stereotype only as she grows old, when this realization about historical, *collective* destiny speeds up her death:

> However, when the new war began, she was still alive, and even though she hadn't gone near the battlefields, she became its victim. She withered away in front of the television through which passed, first timidly and then more and more self-assuredly, the pictures of demolished towns. When in northern Bosnia, near the village of her birth, artillery battles began between what remained of the Yugoslav Army and new Muslim-Croat formations, she went to bed and didn't get up again. (Albahari 44)

The mother spent her life as the Other; she ends her life as a stereotype.

The narrator testifies that the disintegration and *reintegration* of the private is influenced by social-political discourse, which determines the geographical movements of the mother. The narrator mentions that his mother "had been constantly *on the*

downward path: from the empire, through the Yugoslav pre-war kingdom, and to the alleged democracy immediately after the war, to the one-party communism"(Albahari 32; emphasis mine). The meaning of this statement, which not only establishes an improvisonal state system hierarchy but also skillfully reveals the narrator's political preferences and the attitude toward the state from which he is exiled, is erased by Donald's remark that "such sentences [...] should never be found in a literary work, no matter how exactly they describe some character" (Albahari 24). Conversely, the narrator claims that "it was not a question of exactness but of concision" (Albahari 24) by which the mother's destiny suddenly becomes a synecdoche for political and private histories of all the former Yugoslav republics, and therefore can be summarized in one sentence. The tragedy of that condensation is in its repetition, in the fatalistic impossibility of avoiding that *damned destiny* in spite of all individual attempts; the mother claims that there is not a generation which will not be involved in a war.

Additionally, the mother's "downward path" is marked by her continuous moving toward the South, by which Albahari recalls a well know proverb in the former-Yugoslavia region—"the farther south one goes, the sadder it gets" (Što južnije, to tužnije). The proverb reflects material and cultural conditions which were, especially in the southern part of the Balkans, highly influenced by the Turkish reign. The southern Balkans was considered primitive and uncivilized mostly because of the Turkish brutality toward the domestic Christian population. Following the logic of the proverb, Zagreb and Croatia thus represent a geographical spot that is far removed from Ottoman primitivism

and are at the utmost level of civilized development,[41] while all other republics to the east and south are closer to the barbarian, and specifically, the pre-modern concept of humanity. Consequently, Kosovo and Macedonia, which are the most southern regions of the ex-Yugoslavia, are hierarchically at the lowest level and closest to the primitive. The narrator claims that the mother started her journey from Zagreb, and continued to Derventa, Bosnia, which was "her first step on the path downward" (Albahari 34). Shortly after she went to Belgrade, to Dorćol, a sort of pre-war Jewish ghetto with "underdeveloped" urban characteristics, which the narrator "didn't even try to explain to Donald" (Albahari 35). After her husband's death, the mother "continued to *descend* toward Kruševac, into the wider and wider darkness, into the bowels of a war"(Albahari 35; emphasis mine). She then "literally landed" in Peć, Kosovo, where "if we hadn't gotten so well with the Shiptars, (Albanians) … we would never have overcome the power of that darkness" (Albahari 35). The expected stereotype about Peć, a predominantly Albanian town, as a hostile town for non-Serbs, is transformed in a subtle critique of the Christian and ethnic tradition. The darkness mentioned by the narrator's mother alludes to the religious conservativism of the town which was, for more than 500 years (1253-1766), the center of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and in which Jews, as well as Albanian Muslims, were not welcome. At the same time, the darkness implies a lack of cultural enlightenment, suggested both by the geographical location (west Kosovo, near Albania) and an unwillingness to accept the newcomers of a different

[41] Interestingly, Kaplan in his *Balkan Ghosts*, in the chapter about Croatia, emphasizes that difference, revitalized in the 1990s, and attributes it to Croatian "proud" subordination to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He claims that "No matter how exploitive the Habsburg Austrians were, no matter how much the Croats pined for freedom from them, the glitter of Vienna has always been symbolic in Croatia of the West and of Catholicism, and for this reason Croatians have forgiven the Habsburg dynasty for all its sins" (Kaplan 26).

ethnic background, despite the common representation of Peć as the symbol of "Serbian spirituality." Thus, the derogatory name "Shiptar" instead of "Albanian"[42] underlines stereotype (tribal, dangerous Muslims) associated with this place and equates two different religious groups as both minorities and Other in relation to Peć's dominant culture.

However, Albahari also destabilizes these stereotypes as he tells of the mother's travel "south to darkness." Although the narrator points out a few times that the mother "simply repeated what had been written into the space around her" (Albahari 112), she also represents a radical critique of any historical representation, which is always associated with *fathers*. The Balkan historical discourse is gendered and hierarchically organized (Todorova 35). Women's narratives often are connected with domesticity and excluded from certain social contexts in which the private is disconnected from the public. However, the main, although hidden, narrator of *Bait* is the mother, with whose sentence "Where should I begin" the novel starts. This breaks the formula of "Us vs. Them" fiction. Instead of a "respectable" male *witness*, who is a male warrior or male victim, the novel presents a female actor whose private and family life is deeply influenced by political turbulence. Neither her son nor her husband takes control of her story. Although technically her story is told by her son,[43] throughout the novel he insists that he is delivering it as it was told; he even describes the sounds on the tape. And while the mother is afraid of and confused by history, ready to understand it only to the

[42] This linguistic distinction is lost in the English translation, where only the name "Albanian" is used.
[43] It is interesting that in the Balkan countries, when fathers address their daughters and want to express, particularly, their paternal feelings, they call their daughters "son" (e.g. Sine, ovo je za tebe. /Son, this is for you.) Although this vocative reveals a hierarchical structure of patriarchal culture, it has lost its gendered implications and nowadays is used interchangeably with daughter (although, sons are never called daughters).

necessary point of protecting her family, the narrator's father represents an even more passive participant in history and in the social discourse, exactly because of his personal tragedy (camp survivor). The father is silenced by the shock of passive historical victimization.

In other words, the mother establishes female political space based on female stereotypes (pacifism, motherhood) and confirms that the *female* representation is possible in the symbolically male space. In that context, her remark that "everything could have happened differently, that sweetness could have replaced the hotness, but if life could be changed, then we probably wouldn't call it life, we probably wouldn't be alive" (Albahari 95), is perceived as an astute mimicry of her historical engagement. On the surface, it seems that the mother was not involved, or at least interested, in historical changes except as they impacted her personal life, especially since she tells her personal history to her son after the events occurred, and only at his urging. However, as her story progresses, the woman who was in the very beginning described as the center of the narrator's family,[44] is transformed into a person who is not only deeply aware of a historical moment but also fully participates in it in order to protect her own and her family's physical existence (religious conversion, identity change, geographical change, new marriage). In that sense, if the former Yugoslav history had not been so turbulent, the mother would not have been granted the position of respectable historical witness. Ironically, she can only witness history as an othered object. Yet, when she slowly dies

[44] "For years she followed us around the house, picked up the things we had strewn about, and stacked them in the dressers. The bed linen was always starched and ironed. Shirt had sharp creases. Socks turned into inverted balls, arranged in rows in the drawers" (Albahari 15).

horrified by the new war, and enters history as a stereotype, Albahari underlines the irony: too much history is hazardous to one's health.

If the mother's story asserts language's ability simultaneously to affirm and undermine stereotypes, the narrator's story moves in a similar direction: he first believes in the transparency of language and then realizes that it obscures more that it reveals. The narrator's interest in the socio-political is not expressed until the clashes in 1991, when he was, according to his own words, an unsuccessful poet assured of the power of language. Similar to the mother who claimed that "I, too, when I was young, believed the world can be described, but then events occurred that defied all description, and I can no longer believe in that" (Albahari 69), the narrator's fascination with language and words that "can make up for everything"(Albahari 6) stops when language is not able to master Balkan reality.

His decision to be an exile is almost an epiphany, made in a rush and literally overnight, after a failed humanitarian mission in destroyed Banja Luka, Bosnia. The narrator was a mediator between the representatives of a humanitarian organization, who were more interested in taking snapshots than in communicating with inhabitants: "[they] asked if they could photograph the workshop, the riddled roof and shattered windows. They had hitherto photographed without asking, from the car, while moving" (Albahari 72). He also mediates between modern warriors obsessed by the reconstruction of a church destroyed "in the previous war" (Albahari 73). In fact, there was not any kind of meaningful communication between these different groups. His efforts as a translator are unsuccessful because first his employer repeatedly—and absurdly considering the context of their mission—asks why "nearly all the houses in nearly almost all the villages we

passed through had been burned down," and then the soldier keeps insisting on the ruined church because, "[t]hose foreigners, [...] you have to tell them the same thing a couple of times, otherwise they don't understand a thing" (Albahari 72). His sentences become ironical paradoxes: the one who hears them does not understand their full meaning, because knowledge about a cultural context is a prerequisite to communication. In other words, foreigners only perform understanding; they do not really understand the Bosnian war. This is made explicit in a "tower of Babel" reference, the narrator's almost romantic conclusion that "my country, too, was falling apart because someone, though it would be better if I used that world in plural, had been annoyed by the fact that everyone spoke the same language" (Albahari 73). Since in his home country understanding between cultural groups was not possible, even between those who wanted to help and those who needed help, he does not find it difficult to move to a country where a language (English) will *a priori* present an obstacle.

However, in accordance with the narrator's language concerns, in his new environment he is "speaking about language because exactly it, someone else's language, is constantly telling me I don't belong here, that I'm incapable of precisely expressing abstract concepts in it, damned to the world of nouns and figures, newspaper banner headlines and the labels in supermarkets" (Albahari 22). In Canada, in the changed historical moment, the narrator's linguistic abilities are not sufficient either for basic communication or for understanding the social context; moreover, the foreign language does not allow the narrator to re-build his identity, to repeat the (linguistic) model that ironically failed in his home country. His linguistic ineptitude does not allow the narrator to represent himself. The linguistic collapse is double: the native language is no longer a

means of communication, since different discourses (of Babel, of war) disturb its basic meaning, and the foreign language removes the narrator from himself because his limited vocabulary forces him to deal only with shallow reality. An identity crisis for him is inevitable, not only because his faith in language is annulled by the historical context, but also because of the knowledge that his own subjectivity can be created only within a language that he has fully mastered.

Thus the narrator's identity crisis is not only initiated by his move to Canada and subsequent language deficiency, but also by the new historical context of his home country. The narrator narrates the novel while he listens to and comments on his mother's recorded life. Gradually, the mother's story transforms the narrator's (idyllic) picture of the former Yugoslavia; his self-representation as a non-historical person is denied as strongly by the present war as by the personal experience of a historical witness, his mother. Although he, before the war, denied the impact of history on his life (as a poet he believed that language can express everything and language meaning is universal), the new reality annuls his previous stands. The narrator, lost in language, can, however, assert some identity by turning to Balkan stereotypes. History does give him an identity, but a stereotypical one. In this way, the narrator's perspective both supports and subverts the "us" intellectuals' viewpoints. He realizes: "I was a translator and not an interpreter of history; history here had, after all, ceased to exist; that is, there now existed some post-historical time . . . " (Albahari 73). When turned into an internalized knowledge, history and language offer the narrator escape as the only solution: "With regard I had still believed in that common language [...] I had been transformed into a prehistoric man; I had been living in a history that no longer existed, in a time that everyone said was not

taking place" (Albahari 52). The "common language" and the "prehistoric man" recall the faith in the former Yugoslavia, country of *brotherhood and unity,*[45] and in fact represent almost a stereotypical attitude, especially outspoken at the beginning of the 1990s, of Yugoslav intellectuals toward the state. The "Posthistoric time," on the contrary, represents chaos, a complete negation of not only the official Yugoslav, but also the narrator's own, history. In this way, the narrator's perspective both supports and subverts the "Us" intellectuals' viewpoints. The "Us" intellectuals were a unified voice against Milosevic but they were nostalgically attached to the idea of Yugoslavia (the concept, not the country).

Although in the context of the novel Donald himself is more of a stereotype than a round character (which significantly limits the possibilities of an analysis), his perspective acts also as a necessary foil to "Us" perspectives concerning the Balkans' most recent history. Donald's attitude toward the narrator is typical of what Pickering says is the attitude toward the Other: Donald's opinions are formed within and by the Western position of power, which permits him to convey his own clichéd views. The narrator and Donald form and rebuild Eastern and Western perceptions about each other's part of the world and the insurmountable *disconnection* of both culminates in the narrator's angry confession that "if I had more friends, I would have abandoned him a long time ago" (Albahari 79).

[45] A synecdoche—"a country of brotherhood and unity"—stands for the former Yugoslavia. The term was coined by the new communist government after the Second World War, and it referred to 6 republics and more than 20 different ethnic groups. However, the phrase was soon adopted by the people and became one of the favorite and most repeated phrases; it was a symbol of the former Yugoslavia, although its ideological meaning never disappeared. When it is used today, it is either with ironic (yes, that was the country that had purges!) or nostalgic implications (everybody loved everybody and the salaries were great!).

Donald believes that "there is nothing so reliable as history" (Albahari 12), although he misunderstands the "eddy of history" that threatened to suck in the narrator because "history had for him been a textbook, a handbook about events which, once having occurred, [. . .] could no longer be repeated" (Albahari 113). History for Donald cannot have any meaning at the end of the twentieth century, when the future starts, as he says, while the narrator deductively concludes that Donald's attitude is the main reason the West cannot understand the political events in the East. For him, history has only academic meaning, which is clean, simple, and distant, and does not involve thinking about people. Moreover, Donald claims that "global knowledge" is not appropriate for "the time we live in, which stresses the predominance of the regional," and that Canadians or Americans hesitate to know "too much" because the "encyclopedic spirit . . . of the past" is passé and cannot provide practical support in an everyday life. Ironically, the narrator states that "Donald had probably wanted to comfort me; I doubt he had understood me" (Albahari 32).

Donald especially misunderstands the subject that haunts the narrator, the war in the former Yugoslavia. Donald's reaction to the narrator's concerns is extremely simplified and recalls a stereotype about the eastern feeling of collectivity: "You, Europeans . . . always think that life is something more than what can be seen, that behind every mirror there is a parallel world. . . . An American is always only one, [. . .] and a European, especially if he comes from Eastern Europe, is always only part of a multitude" (Albahari 41-42). The Canadian writer also claims that Europeans, including the narrator's people, still do not know that certain political realities have been known for centuries and that their violation can only lead to wars. Also, he states offensively that

Quebec's request for secession will not be finalized in blood, as were the same demands of the former Yugoslavia, because "we're not such barbarians" (Albahari 105). On the one hand, this statement recalls a stereotype, in particular Todorova's conclusion that the Balkan peoples are seen as "tribal" and "a lower civilization category, occupied primarily by Africans, to whom the category is usually applied" (184-5). On the other hand, Donald remarks are typical of otherization. They recall Pickering's concept that the Other is always constructed by a dominant culture that feels itself to be superior.

Seemingly, Donald in *Bait* and the professor from *Snow Man* are the same character. They are both functional characters who voice western stereotypes about the Balkans and see history operating within categories such as war, nations, states, civilizations but never impling real people. For them, history is a progressive stream of socially and economically caused events but never a reason for recognizing human suffering. If there are personal tragedies, as they say, they are a consequence of peoples' inability to adequately respond to a historical context (e.g. Donald claims that Quebec's secession will be nothing but peaceful). Both characters also are stereotypically arrogant and ignorant Westerners who reestablish all of the known Balkan clichés. Pickering says that stereotypes are historically conditioned and manipulated, and these two characters carry out exactly that premise; their responses to the Balkan war revitalize all of the notions about the Balkans already present in (Canadian) culture.

However, while the professor in *Snow Man* primarily voices stereotypes about the Balkans, Donald is a slightly more complex character who illustrates Pickering's idea that the Other always represents an empty identity that is in a marginal opposition to a dominant identity. Although the narrator of the novel implies that Donald's knowledge of

the Balkans is not significant, Donald is eager to position himself against the narrator and the identity he represents. In other words, Donald is not sure whether the narrator is a Balkan, an Eastern European, or just a European, as he tends to call him, but he immediately recognizes the narrator's identity as the Other, marginal and insignificant, and then writes into it the characteristics appropriate to that political characterization. The narrator, for Donald, embodies the ahistorical, transcendental category of the Other and, paradoxically, allows Donald to reinvent his own identity at the dominant center. It is not surprising that at the end at the novel, when he reads the narrator's manuscript, Donald decides to end his friendship with the narrator. Although the narrator implies only that Donald was offended by the book,[46] the reader should understand what offended him: the manuscript, in fact, not only humanized and historicized the narrator, making him now a unique identity in Donald's eyes, but it also disrupted the process of Otherization. After reading the manuscript, Donald--a writer—can no longer have the privilege of perceiving another writer—the narrator—as Other:

> Donald stands before it, as I had imagined, but there's no smile on his face. Nor are there the freshness and relaxation as I expected: his face is hard, his shoulders hunched, his feet planted firmly on the ground. I ascribe this to the fact that he has remained on the second step and that now for the first time I am seeing him from that angle, but when he hands me a folder containing a manuscript, his arm begin to shake as he were lifting one of my suitcases. . . . Donald, however, remains on

[46] "The manuscript, I see as I casually leaf through it, is full of corrections, places that are underlined, and crossed-out words, I notice a string of big question marks" (Albahari 117).

> the same spot. I too, could perhaps return to my previous spot, *but I can't determine where I was standing*. (Albahari 117; emphasis mine)

The irony of Donald's reaction to the manuscript is that it causes yet another dislocation for the narrator: he is the one who loses yet another "connection" with Canadian culture. He does not know where he "was standing" because his past, like Marvell's winged chariot of time, is always ominously at his back: "Then cautiously, quite cautiously, I move rearward until something touches me in the back" (Albahari 117).

It is also important to note that in *Bait*, Donald and the mother represent two different concepts of history: history-as-voice (mother) and history-as-text (Donald). Albahari contrasts these two models, seeing in the mother's story subjective voice that fully, although unwillingly, participated in history, while Donald's academic "knowledge" is an intellectual and disinterested summary of historical events. Albahari seems to respect the historically inflected, personal voice of the narrator's mother over scholarly and general approaches; he does not seem to be worried about the problem of in/accuracy of oral history that so obsesses historians. For him, personal history is the most valuable:

> When mother died, a part of me died with her, just as one part of her had died along with my father, a second with the children from the previous marriage, a third with her first husband, and as the rabbi spoke the prayers and the gravediggers waited behind the mound of freshly dug earth . . . I could think of nothing other but those minor deaths, those minor but dependable estrangements from the world, and I thought of how I would go to a place where my death will hurt no one, where everyone will remain whole. (Albahari 114)

Therefore, the narrator's refrain in the novel "if I was a writer, I would describe/say/tell . . . " can be interpreted not only as a postmodern strategy of *narrating by not-narrating,* but also as a suggestion that academic history will fail to convey history's truth.

In that sense, *Bait* can be seen as Albahari's more complex treatment of historicizing stereotypes. While in *Snow Man* Albahari acknowledges that stereotypes have a dual nature (new identity formation within stereotypical categories), in this novel he examines their ambiguity. On the one hand, personal identities are always unstable because historical events are not stable and constantly initiate changes and re-inventions of selves. On the other hand, this instability can give new freedoms and give "voice" to new historical perspectives, such as new gender perspectives on history. And while stereotypes can sometimes bestow identity, they can also shut down communication and lead to Otherization.

In both books, Albahari implies that understanding between different cultures is impossible because it is grounded in this ambiguity of stereotypical, imposed images. Or, in the narrator's words: "I will always be a European, as he will be always be a North American, and about this nothing can be changed; we will always remain different as night and day" (Albahari 62). Yet, true to his ambiguous stance, his writing of this implies faith that language and history may potentially have a productive union. This is in fact the faith he expresses in his own voice, in the next chapter of this thesis, an interview conducted in February 2006. Like his characters, Albahari is concerned with strategies of identity formation and positioning himself within a political and historical context while actively avoiding political participation.

Thus while *Snow Man* and *Bait* are connected by key thematic concerns, Albahari differently represents his argument about history in *Bait.* In *Snow Man*, he introduces a "silent voice," maps, to speak the truth of historical identity. The maps "speak" to us and make a credible historical argument because they visually reveal historical turbulences (borders), and they straddle the border between "reliable" academic history and "unreliable" lived history (they are made by dominant cultural institutions, but they also are constantly remade as political perspectives change). The narrator's death at the end of *Snow Man*, however, confirms Albahari's pessimistic conclusion that "silent voices" ultimately will be defeated by the past or the present. In contrast, the mother's recordings in *Bait* represent oral history, which is focused on private experiences and local events. Although she never stops being aware of the historical context (wars, different states), she interprets it through the most important events that happened in her family; it is a reflection on her and her love one' lives. The truth of that experience can never be negated or revised by either academic reinterpretations or political institutions: it is her truth, the truth of her own life in relation to world events. In that sense, her very existence is a "presence" in a Derridean sense: her "self" is a voiced self in *speech* that inscribes her into history at least as forcefully as does the academic "writing" of history, and that speech in reality always precedes the written account.[47] The mother's presence on the tape recorder asserts the value of aurality over visuality, speech over writing. It also enables her to acknowledge the constructedness of her own identity and to survive all of the switches induced by history. At the same time, she calls for understanding and recognition of that personal historical perspective:

[47] See: Jacques Derrida. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998.

> I regret that I didn't ask her more questions, that I permitted *her to find the threads between the little pieces of her life herself*, but I had worried about making a mistake somewhere, and I had erred in not recognizing *her need for understanding*, better said, for *additional understanding* . . . (Albahari 36; emphasis mine)

The mother's voice is a challenge both to the narrator, as receiver of her communication, and to academic history.

Ultimately, it can be concluded that *Snow Man* is based on visual metaphors (maps, snow storm) while *Bait* seems predicated on aural metaphors (tapes). The difference is significant to our understanding of Albahari's theses on language, history, and identity. The narrator in *Snow Man* is silenced by history, so he resorts to non-linguistic means to convey his message, while the mother in *Bait* performs a historical process and her voice gives voice to history itself. The mother also articulates voices of peoples who are hidden from history and signifies all of the "unimportant," "small," lived human experiences that seem to be lost in their translation into academic historicism and world-historical events. In that sense *Bait* attempts to give voice not only to the mother, or to the narrator, but to all of (the unheard) former Yugoslav peoples. That is certainly one of the reasons for the novel's warm reception in the former Yugoslavia. While *Snow Man* inscribes intellectual resistance to the process of Otherization, *Bait* calls for sympathetic humanization of the Other through his/her re-embodiment in history. The latter is a more difficult task because it involves redefining the very processes of representation.

Chapter IV

Interview with David Albahari

The first rationale of including David Albahari's voice in this thesis was to supplement the text with the author's words. Since the thesis analyzes a contemporary author's works, it seemed that his voice would provide deeper understanding of the categories which often appear in his fiction: metafiction, language, history. However, once the interview started and Albahari warmly responded to the questions, it became clear that the anxieties present in his fiction, especially those of an exiled person about his in/ability to participate in the actual historical moment, are not only the fears of his fictional characters, but also his own deep, personal angst. The interview reveals paradoxes of Albahari's own life that parallel paradoxes in his fiction (he refuses to be defined as an exiled writer and yet he lives in exile; he is obsessed by linguistic limitations and yet he continuously writes; he declines to talk about politics and yet his novels imply Serbian political situations of the 1990s, etc.). It also supports the main argument of this thesis about the poetical change in Albahari's works initiated by historical circumstances, and further problematizes his notion about identity formation through socially and culturally predisposed categories, such as stereotypes.

The interview was held in February 2006, in the form of email correspondence. Albahari's original answers were in the Serbian language and the translation provided here is mine. As he explains, he "has chosen a language in which [he] feel[s] safer."

Q: You have been living in Canada for the last 10 years. The protagonists in all of your books written in Canada are very uncomfortable in the environment to which they immigrated. How do you feel after ten years?

A: I feel entirely differently from my protagonists. On the one hand, North American culture had been very familiar to me even before coming to Canada, which means that I did not experience any cultural shock. My protagonists are mostly going through different phases of cultural shock when they find themselves on this continent, and to a great degree they aren't based on me, but on my view of that experience among other people. On the other hand, coming to Canada made my dream of dedicating all of my free time only to writing, translating and other writing activities come true. (For fulfillment of that dream I am also thankful to my wife who has a steady job and who is willing to put up with a husband who "does not work at anything but writes.") In other words, I feel very good in my new environment, and after ten years in a country of immigrants such as Canada—and spent in the same place!—you start feeling like an experienced native.

Q: Almost all of your novels are written in the first person, and those from the 1990s are focused on exile and the war in the former Yugoslavia. However, only *Bait* was recognized as a novel truly based on an autobiographical experience, although you claimed that you had never had the tapes and that the mother in the book is just "based upon" your mother. How do you explain that?

A: Not only books which I wrote after the arrival to Canada but a great part of what I've written is based on my experience. For example, the collections of stories *Porodicno vreme* (Family Time) and *Opis smrti* (The Description of Death), have perhaps more autobiographical references than *Bait*. I suppose that, thanks to the NIN Award, *Bait* simply drew more attention and the autobiographical details were more precisely noticed. As you say, the tapes on which the narrative is based don't exist at all, and yet a certain acquaintance of my mother's told me that she remembered when the mother and I had recorded those tapes. Why would I destroy those memories of hers, nonetheless inaccurate? I told her that I remembered that she had been coming then [to the house]. Another possible explanation occurs to me, and that is that there are [in *Bait*] a great number of clear historical, geographical and other details that made it easier to identify the novel with my real life. That, for example, doesn't exist in *Snow Man*, the novel which is in the same manner autobiographical, but in which all of the references are conveyed in ciphers.

Q: Starting from your first novel, *Sudija Dimitrijevic* (The Judge Dimitrijevic, 1978), all of your protagonists are male, and although very contemplative, they are silent (or at least, silenced). In your most Recent books, *Snow Man*, *Bait*, and *Leeches* (for now translated only into German), the narrative is, in fact, the narrator's personal story, which also becomes the narrator's own text. However, these later characters still do not communicate well; they are able to write profoundly and yet they are not able to *pronounce* words. They usually emphasize that they do not want to answer, or they don't

know what to say. Could you explain that dichotomy between written and spoken words in the Canada novels?

A: There are many elements which would be included in an answer to your question, but I'll dwell only on a few. All of the questions regarding language [in my novels] originate from a postmodern disbelief in a possibility of transmission of a real and accurate experience. Speech is only a cause of misunderstanding, instead of being a source of understanding. Therefore, to my characters, silence seems to be a much more reliable means of conveying sense, which is, of course, paradoxical because silence is also liable to different interpretations. But if they need to explain, my characters then decide to write because, when you write, you have a better control over language and over what you want to say. There is a a certain role in all this has for a frustration associated with Wittgenstein's claim that the borders of our language are also borders of our world. The world should be definite, because [we think that] language is definite too, but the world, in fact, is not definite and it spreads outside of our language as well. We see that language can't follow that, and that feeling of frustration brings in a certain nervousness in what my protagonists write. Language betrays us all the time, because it must stay practical and limited, and we would like to have more precise words for, for example, different feelings, psychedelic experiences, dreams, epiphanies (satori). Writing, as I said, at least leaves a possibility to come back and correct a mistake. [Spoken] words are suds-bubbles: once they burst nothing can restore them.

Q: On the other hand, you are very concerned about spoken language, as a form of identity. In *Bait*, your narrator claims that, when he first listens to his mother's voice and her Serbian words, they "frightened me at first. It was two years already I hadn't heard my own language, . . . and when it echoed, . . . I simply drooped." You have recently published an essay in a Serbian newspaper in which you are concerned with Serbian immigrants' tendency to neglect their native language, once they are in Canada. It seems to me that there is an ambiguity here: there is a genuine mistrust in language and, yet, language is a (national) identity symbol. Could you explain this?

A: My distrust of language is purely literary, based on different theoretical concepts. In everyday life I use language as everybody else does. In the situation you mention, my concern about language is rooted in my insight about the speed by which a language is being forgotten and leads to identity changes. Language, however, is not the only basis for identity (especially if the claim that a language is not given to us by birth, but we need to attain it by learning it), but it is a means by which an identity can be preserved and strengthened. Therefore I think that it is important to encourage learning of a mother tongue, because it will contribute to forming a more solid identity, even if that identity is actually a new identity.

Q: You live in Canada, and you are considered an exiled author, but all of your books are first published in Serbia. You have a very interesting position: you are physically dislocated from your native language and the country, but you have never stopped being

a part of Serbian literature. Also, when one thinks about your work, it is never within the terms of diaspora literature. How would you explain your position?

A: In a few of my texts I wrote how I do not consider myself an exile. Why would somebody who left by his own will be considered an émigré? I am now in the position of many other writers—you write in your own language, but you are not in your country, and you live somewhere else simply because you want to live in that place. (A good example is, let's say, Canadian writer Mavis Gallant who has lived in Paris since the early 1950s but writes in English). Life circumstances brought me to Calgary, but my writing was not endangered by the act of leaving the country. In other words, I did not find myself in the situation that I cannot publish in Serbia, which might force me to try to write in the English language. Hence I still write for those who will read that [my books] in the original form, well, in the Serbian language. From a technical point of view, I could write in the English language, but I do not see the point of such a move, and practically speaking, I would just limit myself.

Q: You are also an excellent translator (e.g. of Sherman Alexie, Vladimir Nabokov, Isaac Bashevis Singer, John Updike, Thomas Pynchon, Raymond Carver). It is assumed that one needs to like a novel in order to translate it into another language, but what are your criteria (style, cultural/literature importance, your own literary taste)? And what are your concerns when you are translating?

A: I believe there are two sorts of translators. One group is made of translators who strive to inform their own culture about current literature in other languages and in other cultures. As a translator, I see myself with that group. Thus, the aim of my translations is to draw our [Serbian] readers' attention to a new literary name or a new literary phenomenon in those literatures in which I have an interest. For example, I thought that our readers should learn about Sherman Alexie's prose, for he is one of the most interesting literary figures who has recently appeared in American literature. From the same reason, in the 1970s I was translating so-called "metafiction" stories, such as those by Donald Bartheleme, Robert Coover and John Barth. In short, as a translator, I'm primarily interested in literary information, but not at the expense of [literary] quality. There is also another category of translators: those are translators who are skilled experts of their languages and who translate so-called "classic works," from Shakespeare to Joyce, Musil and Proust. They are also important for a culture because they are in a literally sense "blacksmiths of language." Translating is central to the openness and importance of certain cultures, and it is a great pity that there isn't much translating in Canada and the USA. A culture which is not in constant communication with other cultures is doomed to closing itself within the narrow constraints of its own complacency, which means that sooner or later [that culture] will become uninteresting for other cultures.

Q: In *Bait*, there are little differences in translation, local nuances which would, otherwise, need footnotes (e.g. Albanians/Shiptars). For example, "Shiptar" in Serbian

has a pejorative implication, while in the English translation it was transformed into more general "Albanian." Consequently, a specific cultural meaning was lost. How do you feel about that?

A: I don't intervene with translators' work; in other words, I think that translators alone should find and chose the best solutions. If they want to consult with me, I will always be obliging, but the translators make the final decision. A translation is always an adaptation, and the skill of translating is often a skill of trying to find the best way to rephrase something in such a way that readers in that language don't lose a point. Footnotes, by the way, are the worst thing that could happen in a fiction translation (although they are sometimes necessary, I admit) and the less there are--the better.

Q: It is very interesting that you, as writer who is deeply concerned with inability of communication, keep writing. *Pijavice* (*Leeches)*, published in 2005, is your 9th novel. You've also published 8 collections of stories and two collections of essays. It is a fascinating phenomenon; could you talk about it?

A: The answer is simple—I believe in writing, but I don't believe in the possibility of accomplishing any perfect [literary] work by writing. Therefore every time I try again. You can find a similar poetics—or at least traces of that poetics—you can find in Beckett's or Faulkner's [works]. Furthermore, writing is a completely personal act for me. In other words, I write to reach some answers that I consider relevant for me. When a story is already written, then it can also be published, but a reader most probably won't

recognize what urged me to write that story. At the last, a reader won't read a story that I wrote, but he will read a story he wants to read. That is another ambiguity we need to think about when we talk about language and communication; to be precise, a writer and a reader seemingly read the same story, but each puts the story in the context of his own self, which means that, naturally, a reader can't read what I wrote. I already know in advance that what I try to say reaches the reader in the form in which he wants to hear it. Not even I can read my story twice in the same way. Literature is like a river, and into the same river, as a philosopher said, one can't step twice.

Q: When we were talking about this interview and the language we would use, you told me that I could use English but that you would prefer to answer in Serbian. This strikes me as fascinating, especially when one has in mind your concerns about language. Could you explain this stand of yours?

A: I've chosen a language in which I feel safer, in fact, in which I can without any effort express my thoughts. Although occasionally I write a text in the English language, as a writer I abide to the Serbian language. I grew up in that language and started to write in it, and there isn't a need to change it now. I could have answered, of course, your questions in English, but then I would have needed to pay attention to the things we shouldn't be thinking about while writing (did I use a correct grammar tense; did I find the exact phrase; is an article (ah, those articles!) there where it should be...), no matter what a man writes, a story or an essay or answers to questions.

Q: Your exile experience introduced a change into your poetics. Critics agree that in your earlier works language was the central *organizer* of total human experience, in a Lacanian and Wittgensteinian sense, but that when the 1990s brought the war and ethnic clashes in the former Yugoslavia, the historical context almost demanded to be introduced into your novels. The metafictional concerns with language as a concept collapsed because they were not able to grasp all of the historical turbulences *(Why do people get killed? What is the purpose of the war?*). However, it seems that your interest in language has never withered, it was just "overshadowed" by the epic themes.

A: You are completely right: some new themes have appeared in my prose, but all of them are still seen within the dilemma about the power or impotence of language to actually register our experience. Hence my new books must be looked at through the relationship to my earlier collections of stories and novels. For example, *Bait* should be read and analyzed in pair with my novel *Zinc*, written after the death of my father. The novel *Bait*, for instance, I didn't write [*Bait*] because I wanted to argue with history, but because it was interesting for me to write a book which actually doesn't exist—*Bait* is not a book about my mother who is mentioned all the time; a book about the mother isn't written, and if it is, it is unknown to a reader. *Getz and Meyer* is a novel about the Holocaust, but it is essentially about the inability of language to express the horror of history and memory. But my interest in the linguistic limitations of narration is more visible in the short stories, in which my narrative poetics in all these years has hardly changed. I still experiment with the short story form; many of them are still about

linguistic dilemmas; the character of "my wife" is still a dominant character who, as some inner voice, mocks my attempts to finally achieve an ideal form and an ideal story.

Q: You have said that you started to write novels when you came to Canada, when you had more time for writing, but that you still considered yourself a short story writer. However, it appears that there is a more profound reason for that change from short story to novel.

A: The reason lies, though, in the abundant time I've gained by coming to Canada. Getting that time was a gift: I would feel stupid if I didn't write. Of course, I had more than enough time for writing short stories, and then I was able to dedicate myself to novels. If I had stayed in Belgrade, I would probably have written a novel (and surely different from the novels I wrote here) but certainly I wouldn't have written six novels and three collections of stories. Then, once I started to think about novels, everything else was easy. I am a disciplined writer: I write every day and it is enough if I tell myself that on such-and-such day I am starting to write a new novel. In Belgrade (we talk about the early nineties, and then, about the beginning of the war, chaos, dreadful inflation, fight for survival) to devote that much time to writing was a luxury. For that reason I talk about time as an act of liberation—the novels' themes then just came about.

Q: The novels written in the 1990s and later introduce not only a very specific historical moment but also a trope of Jewishness into your prose. In *Bait*, for the first time you talk

about your own Jewish background; in *Leeches,* although not a Jew, the protagonist is exposed and you talk in detail about Ashkenazi and Sephardim history in Belgrade; *Getz and Mayer* is a masterpiece about two German soldiers who drive a gas-truck in Belgrade. Was this change initiated by the historical moment, the war in the former Yugoslavia, or was there a personal reason, or something else?

A: I need to correct you here: actually my first book, the collection of stories *Family time* (1973), openly talks about my family and my background. Many details from those stories appear and are developed in *Bait.* To a lesser extent, the Jewish theme is also present in my other collections of stories and, of course, in the already mentioned novel *Cink.* In the more recent novels, that theme got more room, although the novel *Gotz and Meyer* is not based on autobiographical details, while the novel *Leeches* is completely out of the family context in which my fiction is immersed from the earliest stories until today. And I need to emphasize that I didn't, as critics sometimes see [it], write the novel *Gotz and Meyer* as a reaction to what happened in Srebrenica or to the stories about new concentration camps in Bosnia, but I wrote it because I wanted to write about suffering of Serbian Jews in World War II. The Holocaust is a unique historical event that must stand alone, as any other historical horror must stand alone, and not serve as some measure of another horror. Yes, maybe the mechanisms of the crimes are the same, but circumstances are always different, and I was, in fact my narrator was, interested in an attempt to explore what could have forced Getz and Meyer, who are real and not fictional characters, to become cold-blooded murderers. Everybody, of course, can interpret the

book as he wants, but for me there is only a story about a mobile gas chamber and the Sajmiste camp.

Q: In these novels from the 1990s, you seem to be incorporating stereotypes about the Balkans, Europe, and the West and forming your narratives around them. Your protagonists try to understand those stereotypes but, eventually, misunderstanding between two worlds, Eastern and Western, is inevitable. To a certain extent, your novels become essays about that problem. Are you reacting to a fact such is that Kaplan's "Balkan Ghosts"-- a travel book that describes the Balkan peoples as barbarian and predisposed to wars-- allegedly influenced President Clinton not to send the troops to Bosnia, or are you reacting to a personal experience, or a historical context?

A: I play a little bit with all those different interpretations and prejudices, but I must emphasize that I don't do that with any specific intention. The stories I narrate are mostly based on my personal experience and not on a wish to settle up accounts with certain ideas and stereotypes at a theoretical level. Of course, they [stereotypes] play a great role in personal experience, because the majority of people accept stereotypes delivered by media, politicians, and celebrities. That's why the conversation between the narrator and Donald (in *Bait*), and, between the narrator and Daniel Atijas (in *Globetrotter*), is filled with stereotypes and prejudices, from which—it must be stressed—nobody is immune. The question is open whether misunderstanding, as you say, is inevitable. My feeling is that Europe and North America are more and more splitting up, and that in fact

understanding is diminishing, but then we are closer to a political terrain, and I'm not interested in that.

Q: The problem you return to in all of your "Canadian novels" is a question of responsibility, individual and collective. In *Snow Man* a Canadian professor of political science, a very obnoxious character, claims that the Serbian people are responsible for the war and Milosevic's reign, while *Svetski putnik (Globetrotter)* is actually an essay about that problem. Could you comment on that?

A: I don't know if that's visible enough in my fiction, but I don't accept condemnation of entire peoples for decisions and actions that were acts of governments and command systems. It's true that people easily come under the influence of propaganda—which is visible in all social systems, not only in totalitarian ones—but never is the entire population under that influence. To say that in Serbia, for instance, all people favored the ideas about so called "Great Serbia" or about alleged Muslim genocide is, to put it kindly, a stupidity that can be said only by somebody who was "brainwashed," that is, people who, unquestioningly accept what a state system imposes on them (as, for example, that poor professor of political science in *Snow Man*). For instance, during Word War II, Canadian authorities put into camps people with Japanese background—I am sure that for that I wouldn't now condemn the entire Canadian population, but that I would find the offender, if I was looking for him, in the government structures from that period. My parents, although they lost their dearest in the horrors of the Second World War, never accused the German people for that, but they talked about Hitler, his big bosses and

Nazis, of those who masterminded "the final solution of the Jewish question" and those who directly participated in its realization.

Q: What do you think about the statement that the former Yugoslavia was "a failed experiment"?

A: For me, Yugoslavia has never been "a failed experiment." That issue is put *ad acta*, and now all over the territory of the former Yugoslavia there are new generations for whom the idea of Yugoslavia doesn't mean anything at all. Sooner or later, that will be just an episode in history textbooks, and when it was being disintegrated, it seemed like the end of the world . . . Now people from our [former Yugoslav] regions talk about how horrible it was to live in Yugoslavia, but those are all fallacious testimonies, made for different uses. I was happy in that country, and if that country had remained, I would have certainly lived happily in it.

Q: There are many maps in your recent books. The protagonists are obsessed by them. In *Snow Man*, the narrator says, "A story doesn't live on paper, among pages of a book, I thought, just as a border doesn't live on a map or in an atlas." It seems that you, or at least your characters, are concerned about the inter-connection between territories (countries) and identities, or I am reading your prose incorrectly?

A: The protagonist of *Snow Man* reflects what the main concern was just before the beginning of clashes in the former Yugoslavia—definition of territories. (The absurdity

of that whole story is that, although nobody was satisfied with the existing borders, those borders between the former republics and today's states are there to this very day, after the meaningless war and unnecessary victims and devastation.) From day to day, we were bombarded by new versions of the borders, new maps, and new interpretations of historical heritage and the importance of forming the borders. Maps were flashing on TV screens long into the night. Therefore it was normal that my narrator is confronted with that world of maps, with the fact that, in spite of his beliefs, there are still unsolved problems regarding borders and definitions of certain territories. And it is certain that between territories and identities there are contiguous points. The collapse of Yugoslavia also shook up as the identities of the people who live there—those who thought about themselves as Yugoslavs all of a sudden lost a state, to be precise, they found themselves in a situation that changed their identities out of the blue. However, that relationship between a territory and identity is visible here too. For example, our immigrants don't think about themselves as Canadians, and they call Canadians those people (most often white) who are born here. Legally, our immigrants are Canadians because they acquired Canadian citizenship, but they will talk about themselves as, for instance, Serbs or former Yugoslavs.

Q: In the novels from the 1990s and later, you use, if I might call them this, "leit motif sentences." In *Bait,* the sentence is a variation of "If I was a writer, I could write"; in *Snow Man*, "If there wasn't orange juice." These refrains turn a narrative into some sort of a lament. Why do you use them so intensely? What do they mean to you (besides provoking rhythmical and cohesive effects)?

A: You've noticed correctly that their purpose is primarily rhythmical and cohesive, which is actually very important for the whole text. I see those sentences as special kernel sentences. They are the core of the story that constitutes the novel. Repeating them, I remind myself, and of course, readers, of the whole story. Besides, they are also a unique refrain; to be precise, my novels are written in one paragraph, which is extremely boring as a form (although a very tempting and inspiring form) and those sentences that emerge as refrains emerge in a long (and in a formal sense equally boring) epic poem written in a decasyllabic or blankverse.

Q: When one reads your novels, it is almost easy to conclude that your literary influences were Borges and high modernists, and that you were influenced by poststructuralist theories, especially that of Roland Barthes. However, it seems there is another influence which has not been mentioned by critics: Samuel Beckett (you have translated Beckett into Serbian). For instance, your *Bait* recalls "Krapp's Last Tape"; the instability of language is one of Beckett's obsessive theme. Would you agree about this?

A: Borges is certainly one of the writers I've read, but he didn't influence me. The reason should be found in the fact that Borges' influence is easily recognized; in other words, a Borgesian story might be written in only one way, as a Singerian story might be written only in a way Singer used to write it. American metafictional writers (or postmodernists) had a much bigger influence of me, especially R. Coover and D. Barthelme, although John Updike and Raymond Carver have also left their mark in my fiction. Beckett has

influenced me undoubtedly, especially by his attitude toward language (and certainly by his attitude toward memory, which is as unstable in his fiction as language), but much more it was an influence of two Austrian writers, Thomas Bernhard and Peter Handke. Bernhard made me like the form of a novel-paragraph, and Handke persuaded me that the meaning of writing is mostly in questioning the exact meaning of writing. All of the mentioned writers, however, learned from Beckett and in that sense he is actually perhaps the biggest influence of the 20th century literature.

Q: Your latest novel, *Leeches*, is somewhat atypical for you. It is almost 300 pages long, while your novels are closer to novellas, and structurally it's a crime-novel written in the first person. Is that another change in your poetics? Are you going to even more remove from a short form that was typical for you?

A: When I started the novel *Leeches*, I imagined it as a much shorter book, but then a lot of material was collected, the story expanded, and in the end I needed to cut it (the first version was 50 pages longer). Maybe this was natural for me, because my every new novel was longer than the previous one, and therefore *Globetrotter*, published in 2001, was my longest novel until *Leeches* was published. However, not for a single moment have I neglected the short form, namely short stories, and essentially I feel as a writer best when I write short stories and just now I am working n a manuscript of a new book which will appear in October 2006, at the Book Fair in Belgrade. By the way, you are right when you say that *Leeches* is different from the rest of my books, but a novel into

which is crammed anti-Semitism, kabala, history of the Zemun Jewish community, and current political issues must be baroque, even when it is written in one paragraph.

Q: In Serbia, there is a general "consensus" that when Serbia and its culture started to be "interesting" for the West, after Slobodan Milosevic lost the elections and the country was "liberated," the war in Afghanistan started and the Western focus was suddenly shifted to that country. Although you are probably the only Serbian contemporary writer whose work is simultaneously translated into German, French and English (both in the UK and the USA), and whose name is recognized in the West, could you comment on that?

A: My impression is that the situation is not that black-and white-- as it might seem from your question. It is true that political events always have an impact—unfortunately!—on interest about a culture, but it is not entirely true that there isn't any interest in Serbian literature. For instance, plays by Biljana Srbljanovic, who is considered one of the most prominent contemporary playwriters, are staged all over the world. It is true that in the States our writers publish little, but in the States translations of any kind are rarely published. But in France every year a significant number of Serbian writers is published, including Svetislav Basara, Radoslav Petkovic, Vladimir Tasic, and other authors. The remnants of political evaluations and relationships toward Serbian politics certainly still influence publishers in different countries, but it couldn't be said that they close their eyes when they run across good works. One should also keep in mind that in recent years some of the most interesting Serbian writers immersed themselves so much into language

that they write books that are very hard or even impossible to translate (Goran Petrovic, Radovan Beli Markovic, Miro Vuksanovic). In short, my impression is that there isn't any organized, planned resistance toward Serbian literature, and that a great part of quality works will sooner or later reach the wider world audience.

Q: What do you think about the binary major/minor literature? In the USA, Slavic programs are very worried about marginalization of "minor" literatures and the purpose of their departments in the world where everything is being translated, where there is not a need for studying a foreign language, not to mention a Slavic language.

A: I don't believe in divisions such as major/minor literature, because they are simply not true. Countries can be divided into big and small by different criteria, but those criteria don't refer to literature and art in general. Many small countries have produced some extremely important writers, what can't be said about all of the big countries. Of course, when one looks at literature from the perspective of Slavic departments, your question takes on other importance, because it warns of possible disconnections between what used to be main channels of spreading other cultures and translating literary works. I am not sure about Slavic departments in Europe, but American cultural disinterest in translation and representation of other literatures is certainly a reason to be worried. I guess, before everything, that must be solved within [departments], but the help of states is also essential, that is to say, [the help] of cultures that find existence of such departments important.

Q: Do you believe that being a novelist today has a social function? In Serbia, especially in the 1990s, your novels were perceived as "a voice of reason," a statement against the current politics.

A: I do not believe that a writer has any predetermined role in society. A writer can, if he wants, be engaged in different social aspects, but without any special rights. That, of course, doesn't mean that a writer can prevent his being seen as somebody's voice, in other words, of speaking in somebody's name. I think that a writer is really a writer only at the moment when he creates, specifically when he writes. In all of the other moments a writer can only play a role of the writer whose name he has, that is to say, to be a human being like anybody else, not to call on his literary status. Why would a writer have any privileged position in society? One must be utterly cautious about those premises, especially when they are seen against all of the bad things that ensue from words and actions of some writers in different historical moments.

Q: Are you working on a new novel or a new translation now?

A: I have mentioned that I'm working on a new collection of stories, and I am putting in order the stories that will be included in that collection. I'm also working on a short novel that I envisioned as a "novel for young adults," a novel in which the protagonists are high-school students. Of course, older readers will be able to read the novel, considering the fact that the novel will play with some elements of a crime novel, as did the novels *Bait* and *Leeches*.

Q: What are you reading now? Are there any young writers that you find engaging?

A: At the moment I'm not reading any fiction, but [am reading] an interesting book by Canadian historian Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian*, about the reception of Indians in Canadian culture. When we talk about younger authors, there are those who are good and inspiring. "Younger authors" is a flexible term, but in the last years I have found interesting authors such as American writers Sherman Alexie and David Foster Wallace, and Canadian writer Kenneth J. Harvey, and I have found Sheila Hetti exceptional. Unfortunately, I don't have a good enough insight into works by younger Serbian writers, although I believe there are many interesting authors.

Q: Do you ever think about moving back to Belgrade, or is your decision about living in Canada irrevocable?

A: In the last few years, I live as often in Belgrade, meaning Zemun, as in Calgary, considering the fact that every year I spend at least 2-3 months in Belgrade. For now, that's how I see my life: as a traveling between two houses (yes, this is also my house now), and when in a few years when the kids grow up and graduate from college, I might make a different decision. You know, I don't have a feeling that I've left, so I don't have a feeling that I need to come back. How could I come back, if I have never left?

Conclusion

Albahari's novels reveal a paradox. Although he claims in *Snow Man* and *Bait* and in his interview that he is not willing to participate in the historical debate about the fall of Yugoslavia (after all, he left the former Yugoslavia when living there became life-threatening for him), or to embrace dominant interpretations of his own—Balkan—culture, his characters are inevitably shaped by this specific historical moment. In *Snow Man*, even though the narrator flees from the former Yugoslavia to Canada in order to escape the war, he faces a personal crisis because his "new" identity in the foreign country is perceived to be an "old" stereotype: a warlike identity. In *Bait*, which is more nuanced than *Snow Man*, the narrator is unable to construct a new, Western identity because his historical background and language do not allow him to blend with the new surroundings. The linguistic and cultural gaps are so wide that they lead only to his alienation.

However, Albahari's (modernist) distrust of language does not disappear as he works through these ideas in these two books; it is only expressed differently. While in his earlier works he was concerned with the inability of language to articulate one's true self, in the Canada novel, language is not able to express the enormity or contradictions of historical contexts or to make intercultural communication comprehensible. Language represents a communicative obstacle because it is it fully embodied in its own culture—and therefore thwarts the understanding of the Other. As for Derrida and Lyotard, for Albahari, language is insufficient by its own nature; it can never fully convey the whole of meaning. But Albahari also situates language in relation to culture and history. In a historical context, Serbia in the 1990s, language can only deepen intercultural gaps.

One of the most interesting aspects of Albahari's novels is that they raise questions about the im/possibility of making political judgments without any generalizations or contextualizations. He tends to satirize Western intellectuals who get their history and politics only from books and stereotypes, yet Albahari himself nominally avoids politics, at the same time both he and his characters are defined by it. In the same manner, his characters are very cautious when they need to verbalize their own political stances, and yet when they make political statements, mostly in order to dispute the negative image of the Balkans, they reaffirm already widely accepted stereotypes and differences. Understanding between East and West is a utopian illusion, according to Albahari, because one can never speak for himself, *or* be perceived outside of his cultural context. Any attempt to change a dominant discourse is futile. Yet he keeps writing about this, as if the perfect communication were still possible.

This thesis has argued that these two novels indicate a poetical and thematic change in Albahari's work. In the 1990s, he switched from metafiction to historical narratives because metafictional novels failed to comprehend the Balkans' warlike reality. He also introduced stereotypes as structural elements of his narratives and formed around them his argument about intercultural mis/understanding. Yet his use of stereotypes shows the (failed) attempt to annul the dominant, negative discourse about the Balkans or, in that sense, any negative imposed discourse about any historically or culturally determined category.

The interview with Albahari supports my claims in this thesis by showing that there is an identity paradox not only in Albahari's fictional works, but also in his life. Similarly to his characters, he constantly tries to maintain an identity that would "over

bridge" the two worlds (he was familiar with Canadian culture even before coming to the country; he declares himself a Serb, a non-exile, who has never left the former Yugoslavia). His almost exotic, international status in the United States and Canada suggests that eastern and western cultures might not be incompatible and may have similar values. The interview also strongly suggests that Albahari's linguistic concerns can be traced back to the high modernists and—although he never states this openly—that he sees his poetics as operating on the borderline between high modernism and postmodernism. He is deeply concerned with intercultural connections, exile, and the burden of history, which he is very careful to contextualize. However, in Albahari's latest book, *Leeches*, the exile theme is present only as a narrative frame (the narrator from exile talks about 1999 Serbia; the book he is currently writing is a young adult novel). It seems that Albahari has quit his attempt to explain culturally imposed discourses, or to provide his own (literary) basis for intercultural communication.

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Vita

Damjana Mraović (Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro) earned her B.A. and M.A. degree in Serbian and General Literature, and Literary Theory at the University of Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro. She has published in Europe and the US and has participated in many conferences, summer schools, and workshops in her native country, Europe, and the US. Her interest includes postcolonialism, contemporary British and American fiction, and analysis of gender, cultural, political and literary stereotypes.